

COMMUNITY AND THE DIVINE SUMMONS: TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF THE
CONGREGATIONAL PASTORAL CALL PROCESS – AN AMERICAN BAPTIST
REGIONAL JUDICATORY FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

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The current pastoral call process used by regions/judicatories of the American Baptist Churches, USA does not have a systematic spirituality of discernment component. In the American Baptist tradition, the pastoral call committee is at the vanguard of the local church's journey in seeking for a new pastor. Who the committee members are, and how they choose the new pastor, play a decisive role in the eventual health of the pastor-congregation relationship. The pastoral call process has profound and long-lasting implications in the life of the church. This demonstration project develops and incorporates a new spirituality of discernment component in the current search and call protocol utilized by the region, which brings in the judicatory body (ABCNJ region) earlier into the process than the current system is designed to do.

In the current protocol, by the time the regional staff comes in to engage the congregational process, the search committee has already been formed. This is a crucial formative stage wherein the region is completely uninvolved in the discernment process. Consequently, those who ultimately constitute the search committee are not always the ones who are gifted and skilled in the task. The predominant system of selecting members of the search committee has been largely through representation from chairs of offices or standing committees predetermined by church By-Laws; acclaim of, as it were,

the *vox populi*; and volunteerism of the willing, rather than through intentional recruitment by way of specific spiritual gifts in discernment.

The new model that this demonstration project has created, among other things, brings in the region *prior* to the congregation taking action to select the members of its pastoral call committee. It also introduces a pedagogical process of conscientization on a spirituality of discernment on the congregational level that tempers the current approach of regulation, prediction and organization that is fostered by a selection process lacking a committed and intentional spirituality framework. The demonstration project argues for intentionality in recruiting and enlisting church members with spiritual gifts of discernment, and develops a practical guide for the exercise of spiritual disciplines. The demonstration project also focuses on understanding better the spiritual dynamics that underlie each stage of the discernment process by exploring the nature of the divine summons as gleaned from scripture and the insights of those who have integrated spiritual journey with the developmental sciences.

As an end result, the demonstration project eventuates into a resource that guides congregations through a creative, faithful, spiritually-grounded, and life-giving outcome in their discernment process as manifested in the calling of a pastor whose qualifications, vision for ministry, sense of call, gifts and skills complement their own.

To my parents, Moley and Elsie, who rooted me in faith and love; and to my beloved wife, Maria Fe, and our children Gabriel and Mariel, who continue to keep me rooted in faith and love.

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I want to thank my doctoral project professor and advisor, Rev. Dr. George McClain, whose gentle spirit is matched only by his sharp editorial eye, for embodying the supportive community at New York Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry program.

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Not enough words can express my gratitude to my wife, Maria Fe, for her loving encouragement. I found strength in her determination in life. In the same way, my children Gabriel and Mariel, granted me permission to "ignore" them during the

demanding final days in the writing of this project. I am grateful to God for the loving memories of my father and mother, whose voices I always hear in my heart. I sought their voice during days when I felt discouraged and weary.

In praise and adoration, I am ever humbled by the ministrations of the sometimes gentle, sometimes seismic, always sustaining Holy Spirit who dispenses God's faithfulness endlessly through time, and guides me into wisdom and practice in my ongoing ministry for Jesus Christ.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The topic of a spirituality of discernment for the pastoral call process is addressed better by some communions than others. Those communions and their judicatories that have spent intentional reflection, study and practice in this area of ministry are undoubtedly the ones that are likely to have a systematic discipline already in place.

The focus of this doctoral project is specifically the creation of such a resource for my own communion, the American Baptist Churches, USA, and the particular context of its judicatory, the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, where I currently serve on the regional ministry team as associate regional pastor and area minister. The project pays particular attention to the spirituality of selecting members of the pastoral call committee itself. I have discovered in the course of this research that it was at times difficult to stay on this narrowly focused topic because it straddles the wider field of spirituality and implicates its many subfields such as spiritual direction, spiritual formation, pneumatology, etc. The list is frighteningly long!

A potent dose of humility, and a good advisor, kept me on topic. While obvious to many, I feel it is still a responsibility to articulate from the beginning the way that I understand the topic of this demonstration project. Like what most authors do, the way I arranged the chapters in this project discloses not only the way I perceive the logical structure of the topic, but also the cognitive trajectory that I chose to follow based on that understanding.

The project had required areas of research that needed to be addressed as chapters. What I have done is incorporate these required chapters into what I think are fundamental components of the project as well. The way that I have ended up organizing the flow of the chapters illustrates those components that I have decided to be very important to the entire foundation of the project. And so, for example, I begin with an expansive view of my vision for ministry so that I can, at least in my mind, situate the entire project within a fundamental starting point – ministry itself. The succeeding chapters move towards specificity, addressing very particular aspects of the subject. Then I conclude the project with another expansive statement on the nature of the divine summons to, as it were, recast the subject back into its proper and broader place.

While I was in the residential portion of my program at New York Theological Seminary, a motto by the seminary president on the nature of doctoral demonstration projects was quoted so often by our professors that it almost circulated as an urban legend of sorts: “You are laying a brick, not building a cathedral.” That admonition has proven indeed to be wise and, in the end, pragmatically gratifying for me.

I purposely used two words in the title of this project to delineate and acknowledge the limits of my effort in this project. First, “framework” is a good image for me. My background in health care has taught me that a skeleton only serves as the scaffolding on which musculature grows. Second, the word “towards” is forward looking. It anticipates and points to further development and growth. It announces that it is only part of something bigger.

And so even as I offer only a skeleton and a still evolving portion of a larger preoccupation of my ecclesial community, I do so prayerfully and hopefully that it will add one more little measure in the ecclesial community's common quest in building God's household of love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
AUTHOR’S PREFACE.....	iv
CHAPTER 1	1
A VISION OF MINISTRY.....	1
CHAPTER 2	19
THE MINISTRY SETTING.....	19
A History of the American Baptist Churches, USA and the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey	19
CHAPTER 3	34
WALKING TOGETHER	34
A Vision of Local Church and Judicatory Partnership in the Pastoral Call Process within the American Baptist Regional Judicatory Context.....	34
CHAPTER 4	49
HERE AM I	49
Biblical and Spiritual Insights on a Spirituality of Discernment	49
CHAPTER 5	66
TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF THE CONGREGATIONAL PASTORAL CALL PROCESS	66
Constructing an American Baptist Regional Judicatory Framework.....	66
CHAPTER 6	81
THE DIVINE SUMMONS.....	81
The Movements of God’s Call.....	81
CHAPTER 7	92
GROWING IN MINISTRY.....	92
Ministry Competencies and Epilogue	92
APPENDIX A.....	104
APPENDIX B	105
APPENDIX C	106
APPENDIX D.....	107
APPENDIX E	108
BIBLIOGRAPHY	109

CHAPTER 1

A VISION OF MINISTRY

“For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Esther 4:14¹

The people of God discern God’s will for itself through the decisions and actions it makes within the context of community. These decisions and actions, as the declared expressions of its understanding of God’s will for itself, constitute its stated *ministry*. It is, therefore, reasonable to posit that the totality – the corpus, as it were -- of its ethical behavior defines the community of faith. Jesus declares this crucial point when he said, “You will know them by their fruits (Matt. 7:16).” Ministry, as *ethical practice*, is adjudicated in the context of the present and as a direct response to a need that emerges within the faith community. Such responses can be proscribed (those that derive from existing beliefs or values) or reflexive (in the sense of response elicited directly from presenting needs) in nature. And so in a decisive way, ministry takes place in the context of need; and needs, by their very nature, emerge in the “now.” We can, therefore, say in a very significant way that each occasion that is called forth becomes, for ministry, a moment of eternity.

¹ The Division of Christian Education, National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1989). All subsequent scripture citations in this work are taken from this version of the Holy Bible.

Since ministry takes place in the context of need, a faith community seeking to understand what ministry means is obviously first required to describe, as best as it can discern, the terrain or setting wherein which this ministry must occur. Analyzing and discerning, and consequently understanding, the social and political context wherein practice is to take place are necessary tasks of ministry. I use here the terms *social* and *political* in their broadest sense to mean the communal and relational matrices wherein people strive to exist and give form to their particularity. Confronting ourselves with the "this" of our ministry's "now" is to act responsibly and effectively in the exercise of our charge as people of God. Above all, this intentional, if not enforced, confrontation with the corporeal subject of ministry exerts a sacramental function in that such act engages the individual or the community in the solemn, life-giving, re-enactment of the very mystery of the incarnation. As Jesus himself put it: "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me (Luke 22:19)." Jesus' "this," manifested in his humanity, is the blood and the body of the world which God so loves.

But in these days it is so difficult to discern God's call to community when the highest decibels we hear from the halls and the altars of churches are voices of disconnectedness rather than voices that seek to heal the breach. In such cacophony, God's voice, Christ's very plea and prayer to God to keep us all one, is muted. It cannot be heard by the watching world unless the church has a preferential bias for the instruments of unity that are hers in Christ – one baptism, one eucharist, one ministry.²

² Faith and Order Paper No. 111, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982). A seminal ecumenical document that took almost 50 years to develop.

In 1985, noted American sociologist Robert Bellah and his associates wrote the groundbreaking social analysis of American behavior called, *Habits of the Heart*.³ In this work, Bellah draws his primary inspiration from the civic vision of French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville visited the U.S. in the 1830's, and saw that voluntary associations – communalism – was at the heart of the strength of American civic society. He believed that civic society was the venue where community is nurtured and maintained, and the America that he saw captured this vision with imagination. Since then, however, tectonic shifts have occurred in the fabric of American civic society.

In this broad study, Bellah and his fellow social scientists identified the deleterious and divisive effects of individualism in the American civic culture. In 1991, barely 10 years later, the same team of sociologist wrote a follow-up to their 1986 work and called it, *The Good Society*.⁴ In this study, they revealed that the social conditions in America that they described in the previous work have gotten worse. In their 1991 study, they candidly admitted that they underestimated the insidious, destructive power of individualism on the communal bonds of American society.

Another sociologist, Robert Putnam made another striking observation in a 1995 article titled, *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*.⁵ He defines social capital as those features in our social organization that facilitate and encourage cooperation for mutual benefits. One observation he made was that from 1980-1993 the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10% - representing at that time about 80

³ Robert Neely Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (University of California Press, 1985).

⁴ Robert Neely Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

⁵ Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.6, Number 1 (January 1995) : pp. 65-78. Like Bellah et al, Putnam also draws significantly from the thinking of Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal work, *Democracy in America*.

million people. During that same period, league bowling decreased by 40%. Clearly, one of the things these findings pointed out was that people prefer to do more things by themselves. Putnam, for example, reports in his essay that his study revealed that religion is about the only sphere in society that has, for the most part, sustained the associational impulse in people inspite of its declining membership. Christian sociologists have helped us see that the call of the church is a call to community. We need to pray fervently in these days for God's guidance, and for the Spirit's transformative presence in our hearts, because while the church may be the only remaining venue where community is birthed, such venue can also be the dreadful epicenter of its disunion.

The executive director of the Center for Career Development in Ministry in Boston is a good friend of mine. In his office wall hangs a framed picture of the Chinese character for the notion of "Crisis." The Chinese character for the word, "Crisis" has two linguistic components combined into one meaning – "danger" and "opportunity." We live in a time of crisis for the church. It is a time equally ripe for both opportunity and danger. Earlier studies on American demographic reality and its impact on American religion⁶ have focused specifically on the life of the church, and have prophetically diagnosed and forecasted a socioreligious American landscape that is undergoing continuous change, and a future that promises nothing but more of the same journey for the church on an unpredictable terrain called the *metropolis*.

While these data can be permuted into a constellation of interpretations depending on what kind of information one is looking for, all share the one commonality in its

⁶ Such as the major Gallup study in 1988 called, *The Unchurched American*; and George Barna's *Seven Trends Facing the Church in 1990 and Beyond*.

assessment that the socioreligious features these studies have outlined are all situated in the same historical location of the church - the "now." And so from the vantage point of a globalized ethos such as that of the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, the "this" of the "now" is plain in at least one predominant way: that is, that the praxial foundation, or action base, of ministry is always shifting. From a larger perspective, the findings of these prescient studies only undergird the irrepressible reality which, beginning in the late 60's, has swept the North American landscape, perhaps reaching an acute stage in the 1980's, indicating that the dissonant context of the globe, with its attendant cacophony of human voices, has come to, and is irreversibly shaping, the American metropolis. Historical destiny or not, all signs but indicate that this reality is here to stay.

We know that in Genesis 12 the word of God grips a villager named Abraham. He is so gripped by the divine summons that he is thrust from his little town of Ur into the world as a wandering nomad. In Abraham we see that God's plan to redeem and reclaim creation enters history through the call of a man whose obedience had amazing cosmic consequences. Abraham, however, was not called for his own sake, his own individual benefit and pleasure. He was called to be father of a great people, a nation, and a global community. He was called so that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed, "I will make of you a great nation...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3)."

God's call is always a call to community; and whenever an individual is chosen and called it is always for the sake of others. Our biblical faith shows that God calls forth a people into being not for itself but for others. In addition, its acclaim as a "holy nation",

a “royal priesthood” is not defined by its solitary purity, but by its servanthood. We do not exist for ourselves. We are, indeed, “God’s building”, and it is in this great privilege of glorying in our beauty that we may be misled into believing that we are the end all-be all. However, the Apostle Peter reminds us that we can only plant, we can even water, but “neither the one who plants and the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth (I Cor. 3:7)” The one true foundation of the church is Jesus Christ.

A Theological Milieu for Ministry

As a person of Asian heritage and upbringing I tend to view the world as an organic whole composed of individual parts which are dependent upon each other. The individual parts have necessary roles to play, and together these individual parts constitute the community. Philosophically, my sense of selfhood, for example, is bound to the notion of *community* or the *family*. To that extent, my pursuit of goals that ultimately benefit the community’s common good is a form of self-actualization for me.

And so in ministry, and in the understanding of my experience of vocational call, I have discovered much synchronicity with Jesus’ nonhierarchical life. Additionally, I believe in the *imago dei* inherent in every person which bestows in each one the capacity to see a vision of God’s desire for the world. Consequently, I have a deep commitment to the superiority of collective wisdom over individual achievement; and where individual achievement becomes necessary it yet has to occur within the crucible of community.

The methodological attitude that resonates with this reality is one of inclusion and collaboration. The ethos of service that suffuses my understanding of ministry requires leadership that is founded on listening and empowerment of all. The “Servant Leader”

motif in the New Testament is the most descriptive foundation of my understanding of leadership. The secular notion of corporate “CEO” that has crept into some of our understanding of denominational and regional - even local church - leadership is, in my opinion, a distortion of the biblical model of servanthood and the “Body of Christ.” Leadership grounded in such individual and solitary personal achievement is directly related to some of the chronic symptomatology of “turfism” that we are experiencing in local church structures and in contemporary religious life.

Nonetheless, the theological understanding and practice of ministry that I have outlined above did not emerge out of a vacuum, as some theologies are wont to do. The way I understand God and the universe has been – and continues to be – shaped by the particularity of my historical experience as a native son of the Philippines, a country that has a deep and painful colonial history. This particular experience has brought me in close proximity to the many concrete manifestations of domination systems that make their way onto society and institutions, masquerading as benign – even benevolent – forces of “order” and “efficiency.” The inconspicuousness of such “benign effort” implants itself into the very foundations of society and governance where it unleashes its full, and true, malevolence.

The Spanish conquistadors introduced Christianity to the Philippines and indeed sowed the first seeds of the faith. But the secular and economic motives of the colonizers became evident after not too long. The Spanish gentry, through Machiavellian alliances with Filipino clan leaders, created a feudal system which systematically exploited and parceled the land and its people. Then the American Protestant missionaries arrived and introduced the tenets of the Free Church movement. The ensuing clash between

egalitarian Calvinism and medieval Catholicism created a kind of spiritual "liberation" for many Filipinos. The Protestant missionary movement, however, also brought a particular Anglo-American flavor and on many critical points was less than vigilant against the tendency that they were merely introducing another form of the "cultural gospel."

As a 4th generation Filipino Baptist, my ancestors were one of the first converts of missionaries from the American Baptist Churches, USA to the Baptist faith. In my personal history and spiritual journey I have seen the transformative power of biblical faith that shape people's lives and build communities of hope and justice. But I have also witnessed how the Bible, distorted by the dark side of human freedom's moral agency, has been used to dehumanize and oppress. And so my cultural and ethnic histories bring me to the threshold of the Bible's world with great humility and attentiveness not only to my inadequate perspective to plumb its depths, but to my dreadful capacity as a mere mortal to dim its glorious truth through my gift of freedom. The "will to power"⁷ continues to lurk beneath humanity's dark shadow, waiting opportunistically to rear its head when the moral defenses of a person or an institution are compromised by itself. And it is this desire to usurp and to possess that is at the root of domination systems that manifest themselves through the many oppressions of, say, racism, sexism, and classism.

I was raised in a theological environment that believes in a personal God who is the source of all things and as such is active and present in all the affairs of life. This God holds the world and the cosmos together with a moral ordering that governs the consequences of human actions. I was raised to believe that reality is not a predetermined

⁷ In his seminal book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), Reinhold Niebuhr distills the root of all evil to this ancient form of pride. See especially pp. 53 ff.

qualitative hierarchical grid, i.e. that no one is born inferior or superior that nothing is inherently evil. Rather, I was brought up to understand God's world as a unified whole that has different but nonetheless essential parts that inter-depend on one another. Each part has a unique place and function in the life of the whole. And so I do not see, for example, suffering and evil as attributes of a being equi-primordial with God but rather as manifestations of a disorder in God's creation brought about by human unfaithfulness. In this sense, evil and suffering do not exist outside the transforming power of God's unconditional love and even, in the end, are paradoxically used by God as instruments for a greater good.

And so I come from a people with a tenacious capacity for long-suffering fueled by the awareness that the inner life of the world is bound to a good, and loving God. It is a long-suffering that is naively -- if not, arrogantly -- misunderstood by Western rationalism as a form of deterministic fatalism. From my point of view, it is long-suffering borne out of an abiding belief that divine goodness and love are in the end unassailable and will bring into fruition its intended purpose. The "People's Revolution" which dismantled the Marcos dictatorial regime in the Philippines astounded the world. It is a Filipino's modern paradigm of an age-old Filipino belief that in God's moral universe, evil - by its very nature – preys upon itself and ultimately consumes itself.

Divine goodness and love are not only unassailable, but they have been seared in the soul of humanity – seared into its very being because it is the mark of its Creator and this Creator's nature. This is the same reality that Walter Brueggemann encountered in his insightful and powerful journey into this biblical reality when he saw this ontological signature of the Creator in the soul of humanity fermenting, as it were, in the

unquenchable and irrepressible compulsion of the prophet's heart to audaciously proclaim the vision of God's reign. God's prophet cannot but see this radically new reign; and in seeing cannot but imagine it.⁸

The operative vehicle that expresses the human will in its day to day interaction with the world and with others has been given many names. But when dissected to their very root these names all find themselves feeding on the same soil we commonly call power. The assumption I am making at this very outset is that how we understand, perceive, and interact with the world around us and with others is shaped by our exercise of power. And how we exercise our power is likewise shaped by our particular historical location. It is through power that we position ourselves in the midst of our interlocutors and of nature.

Through these contextual realities in which I am inextricably bound as an historical creature, I now perceive power as a force that not only links all of life but also has the capacity to destroy life. Because of its contingency with my human condition and historical location it has by necessity a negative and positive pole -- each pole being pliable to the moral agent exercising it.

Power in the negative pole is a force used by the privileged to dominate and control those who are marginalized. It has a drive to obliterate the identity of the weak and make it conform to "its own image." I have experienced power to possess an acquisitive nature wherein it desires to accumulate more of what it already has in abundance in order to maintain its position of dominion. Power in this pole takes the form of institutional oppression wherein a structure is built that systematically precludes the possibility of the weak gaining a foothold in the power structure. It also takes the form of

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 44 ff.

economic oppression whereupon the full brunt of the oppressor's physical and material wealth is brought to bear upon the weak thereby subjugating them. To this pole of power I am, as a Filipino, very familiar. I was also raised and educated in a culture that saw this form of power take on a religious face and discovered that under this guise it was the most insidious and destructive in its distortion of the Christian gospel.

I do not perceive power, however, as altogether an aberrant expression of human will. As I mentioned earlier, as a Filipino - and broadly perhaps, as an Asian – I view the world as an organic whole composed of individual parts which are dependent upon one another. Power, therefore, has a constructive and necessary role to play in maintaining community. I am accustomed to assigning authority and respect to a leader without feeling any sense of diminished selfhood. All these, however, assume that the one from whom power and authority emanates and to whom respect is due, has justly earned this place of honor. This is a place that is not acquired by force or manipulation but is instead offered by the willful consensus and blessing of the whole because this person has demonstrated above all a moral ascendancy in the very crucible of the community.

Paul Tillich described best for me the essentiality of power in linking together a community of humans. In his book, *Love, Power, and Justice* Paul Tillich⁹ illustrated how power is the expressive vehicle of agape love. Power in its essential nature is a creative force because it is the breath of love and expresses itself in justice. There is an innate unity between love, power, and justice.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications*, (London: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1954).

An Approach to Ministry and Christian Praxis in the Metropolis

The diversity of the globalized metropolis implies that imbedded in its very reality is a plurality not only of culture and ethnicity, but also of perspectives. This diversity of perspectives discloses a multiplicity of “ways of seeing.” A presumption is, therefore, made that there are a variety of perspectives, or vantage points, from which we can view “Ministry” and see a unique aspect of the greater whole. Each of these “windows” enables us to see a particular reality of that object, and tells us that the meaning and message of the object from that perspective has been conditioned by its finite location and serves to remind us that all interpretation is conditioned by our context. Each vantage point – or perspective – tells us a story. Brought together, a multiplicity of perspectives illuminates the larger story – a whole that is greater even than the sum of its parts.

Here the work of Tiffany and Ringe lends additional support, for example, in their emphasis on paying attention to the circumstances and identity of the interlocutors of the interpretive task. They affirm what I have mentioned earlier regarding the importance of reflexively engaging one’s self in the critical task of contextualizing biblical faith in one’s ministry location when they remind us that “the world in which we live is God’s creation, and that God is present through and active within that world...the world is a primary ‘text’ within which one can discern God’s word.”¹⁰

The notion of “Perspectives” also imply that one perspective occurring singularly, provides only a magnified view of an event or object, which naturally tends to blur our vision of the surrounding context wherein an event or object of history occurs – much

¹⁰ Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 25

like what happens to anyone viewing a specimen under a microscope. In this instance, the object's constitutive parts invisible to the naked eye is made visible. But the magnifying action of the lens blurs the surrounding field where the lens is not focused.

What I propose is that a contextually integrated method of understanding ministry leads to its most faithful and authentic practice. This method adopts a disciplined intentionality of self-awareness regarding the provisionality of one's perspective of life as a whole. In embracing this proposition I am also saying that the perspective of my context is limited and is in constant need of enrichment and correction from other perspectives. Said another way, the methodological approach of "reflexive engagement" – the conscious act of involving one's self in the task of criticism – is a necessity and a requirement in any attempt at authentic ministry and self-disclosure.

From this vantage point, I approach ministry and its various subjects, with the profound awareness of the complexity of life and history and its inherently provisional and fragmentary ability to "capture" the essence of an inscrutable God.

Ministry occurs in the context of need. And need, by its very nature, demands of ministry, as modeled by Jesus, contemporaneousness or a "now-ness." Martin Luther King, Jr. saw this non-negotiable reality of the Christian ethic when he spoke of the "fierce urgency of now."¹¹ Interpreting and understanding the unique particularity of a faith community's location or venue is a fundamental premise of its ministry. We need to refresh our biblical understanding of the Christian faith ever so often, to maintain a critical practice of inclusiveness, and to appropriate in our personal and corporate lives

¹¹ From his speech on jobs and the economy, which also contained the famous "I Have a Dream" refrain, delivered at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963.

the biblical tradition of hope as a dynamic critique of the oppressive ideology of control that dominates our culture. Gustavo Gutierrez provocatively and rightfully observed that talking about God - or theo-logy – is, for the Christian, a second act. The first act is contemplating God and *doing* God's will. A theology that is not mediated by practice, indeed, does not meet the requirement of the God of the Bible.¹²

It is clear that the “doing” of God’s will is a biblical requirement of discipleship; and this discipleship summons one to – and to be in – community. As argued earlier, the terrain of the postmodern world resists ministry’s innate call to community. Yet it is the same world where barriers of distance and awareness of the plight of other people are bridged in nanoseconds over the internet and satellite broadcasts. Such a profound disconnect poses a praxiological dilemma for the disciple striving to be faithful in the practice of ministry. The burden of the disciple becomes heavier as it contemplates how she can or may act in ministry and solidarity with the suffering who is so physically far away. Yet it is in such awareness that the longing to be alongside the sufferer becomes intense in the disciple; much more so when the work of Paulo Freire, for example, is considered when he says that:

True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love...in its praxis. To affirm that men...should be free and do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce. Since it is in a concrete situation that the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is established, the resolution of this contradiction must be objectively verifiable... Just as objective social reality exists not by chance, but as product of human action, so it is not transformed by chance. If men produce social reality...then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for men...to no longer be prey to its (oppressive reality) force, one must merge from it and turn upon it. This can be done by means of praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.¹³

¹² Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987) p. xiii.

¹³ Lisa Heldke and Peg O’Connor, “Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism*, (New York: McGraw Hill Co., 2004), p. 10-11.

The urgency of the historical task of the disciple is articulated by Freire in compelling terms. And it is obvious that in he is also posing a valid critique of the liberal approach to social transformation.

...reflection – true reflection – leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. In this sense, the praxis is the new *raison d'être* of the oppressed; and the revolution...is not viable apart from their concomitant conscious involvement. Otherwise, action is pure activism.¹⁴

That said, in my view Freire poses not only a praxiological problem, but a pastoral dilemma. His otherwise powerful argument for praxis as the foundation of his understanding of solidarity brings with it, it seems, an obstacle to its own practical realization. For how can we account for the efficacy of the “solidarity” of countless peoples separated by oceans in other parts of the world in the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa who by the limitation of their distance used instead their economic influence through divestiture, and their moral power through, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, the “public processing of pain” in the media and the court of world opinion? There is transformative solidarity possible outside of the apparatus of Freire.

One of the important issues that has emerged recently in pastoral ethics is the relationship of “solidarity” to the notion of “solidity.” The concept of “solidity” seems to emerge out of the mathematical field of Physics, to describe a state of cohesion of similar atoms that form mass or “solids.” Used in theology or ethics, this notion seems to be an apt analogy of Freire’s model of solidarity wherein he views legitimate participation in liberation struggles as *only* being adjudicated in physical proximity and presence with an oppressed person or persons – being with them, as it were, shoulder to shoulder.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

Obviously, however, we are limited in our very movements by the constraints and finiteness of physicality. So how can a disciple of Jesus Christ, burdened with the knowledge of oppressive systems that continue to dominate the weak beyond one's realizable sphere of influence, faithfully remain in solidarity with the struggle of the oppressed?

Walter Brueggemann's discussion of Jesus' ministry of prophetic criticism may offer a more expansive model than that of Freire's. He argues that the very presence and teaching of Jesus confronts the "royal consciousness" with "ultimate criticism."

The way of his ultimate criticism is his decisive solidarity with marginal people and the accompanying vulnerability required by that solidarity. The only solidarity worth affirming is solidarity characterized by the same helplessness they know and experience.¹⁵

Here Brueggemann, in my view, offers an important way to expand Freire's important definition of solidarity into a broader biblical matrix that is grounded on the New Testament's proclamation of Jesus' "atoning" and "sacramental" ministry for the whole world. Jesus' solidarity is one of "compassion... (which) is to be understood not simply as a personal emotional reaction but as a public criticism in which he dares to act upon his concern against the entire numbness of his social context."¹⁶

With this important addendum from Brueggemann, in proposing a Christological foundation for it, we can now find a more expansive- if not more faithful – understanding of solidarity. The model of Jesus' "solidarity of compassion" is liberating in itself, for it frees disciples to continue participating in the struggle of the oppressed in their respective circles of influence even within - and in spite of - the limitations of their physical or

¹⁵ Brueggemann, p. 81.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

geographical location from the oppressed. I see the model as liberating because it is more of an invitation not only to a way of the mind as in discursive practices, but above all to a way of life.

The New Testament approach to ministry is unequivocally Agapeic - radical, absurdly extravagant, transcending, and unconditional love. Subjected in emancipating hope, its primary ethic is one of risk. The shepherd model which Jesus employed, dismissed as a sign of weakness in the distortive patriarchal mythos of our culture, is the personification of risk-oriented agape. Ministry, to be biblical, must first be incarnational and, therefore, participatory; always connected to the pain and the longing of its particular location, wherever this may be. To be, in Paul's words, "in Christ," means, therefore, to be in resistance against the oppressions that continue to threaten the human community that Jesus sought to build.

As such, this approach raises some implications distinct to institutions such as the ABCNJ where I currently serve. Specifically, its ethical reflection will not begin appropriately if it does not revisit the associational principle of our Baptist heritage and its core value on *Soul Freedom* which gave it and the 33 other regions of the American Baptist Churches, USA their birth, and grapple with its meaning in light of the communal form of living which our faith mandates and requires. The terrain of the metropolis is rugged and, at points, harsh. In this landscape, communality faces severe challenges. How can the church remain as the clarifier of vision in the midst of plurality? How can it talk about God in light of theology's seeming powerlessness in this technocratic society that continues to erode community? As a Christian organism, the church is called to the Christological task of liberation and reconciliation in the human community.

The efficacy and power of its witness and theology are contingent upon the doing of this task in the public arena where people dwell and question life from the depths, and where those who struggle against the many oppressions of life still find others in captivity. The contours of this terrain are always in the state of being reformulated, in a state of flux, so to speak. In the unpredictability and in the clutteredness of this seeming wilderness, ministry that is done only for the sake of the institution will in time - like so many others - lead only to that ministry's obsolescence and demise into the cynical critique of the people it seeks to serve.

Ministry for the sake of Jesus, on the other hand, means following him on this terrain and participating in his ethic of resistance and liberation. The praxial implications of our biblical faith are disturbing for they put into question and bring to judgment our easy preoccupation with the familiar, with institutional survival and the sectarianism and ethnocentrism of what we sometimes call "denominational identity." Who we are in our particularities as Christians is only valid in so far as this particularity serves the will of God disclosed in the personhood of Jesus. Our biblical tradition of hope calls us to maintain a radical posture of openness and self-critique so as to remind us that the mission of Christ in the world is done in community where even the "other" is not excluded.

So what is the context in and through which this vision of ministry must find embodiment? In the following chapter I will attend in detail to the particularity of my ministry setting.

CHAPTER 2

THE MINISTRY SETTING

A History of the American Baptist Churches, USA and the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey

The context of my present ministry is within the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey (ABCNJ) where I serve as associate regional pastor and area minister. The identity of ABCNJ is best understood in conversation with the wider denominational heritage of the American Baptist Churches, USA, and the broader history of Baptists. The rationale behind this approach will be disclosed in the course of this section's elaboration. Suffice it to say at this point, it is necessary to engage briefly the broader history of Baptists to extract the particular history of the American Baptist Churches, USA (ABCUSA), and then to engage briefly the history of ABCUSA in order for a fair reading of the history of ABCNJ to be possible.

Baptists and the American Baptist Churches, USA - Identity and Witness

Some Important Considerations

The historian Carl Becker once said that if we are to have a good understanding of the inner spirit of any age, we should look for “certain unobtrusive words” of that age or

era.¹⁷ Arguably, one of the “unobtrusive” words in Baptist life is “Autonomy.” It is, however, disingenuous in the least to pretend that any reflection on the meaning of autonomy can legitimately begin solely on the terrain of Baptist life. Baptists did not invent the ideal of Autonomy. The term “Autonomy” comes from the Greek word *autos* (“self”) and *nomos* (“law”). And so in its neutral linguistic context, the term is generally understood as that faculty which human reason and the human will possess of *being their own lawgiver*.¹⁸

Just as important, it is essential to note that the ideal of Autonomy is directly linked to a monolithic shift in the self-understanding of human beings and their place in the universe, a decisive intellectual passage from the medieval world into modern civilization that ushered a radically new worldview. As far back in time as Confucius, Mencius, and Lao Tzu in the East; and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the West, we already find the inseparable link between virtue on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the rational, thinking individual as an “autonomous moral agent.”

One can argue, then, that the way Baptists have grown to understand the principle of Autonomy has been profoundly influenced by the legacy of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. With the historical roots of the Baptist movement found on the soil of continental Europe, this may well be so. The historical strand of the Autonomy principle, therefore, that formed Baptist life and thought was the strand that took form as a revolt against authoritarianism. Nevertheless, this “revolt against authority” – this “awakening”

¹⁷ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), pp. 2-3.

¹⁸ William H. Gentz, ed., *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, (Abingdon: Nashville, 1986), pp. 103-106. See also, Livingston, p. 3.

- heralded the dawning of a new day, birthing innumerable expressions of individual human freedom.

And so the idea and meaning of Autonomy extends much farther historically from our Baptist location. While it is not the purpose of this particular work to focus thoroughly on this aspect of the subject, it is important to have an honest acknowledgement of this reality. We do have enormous resources to draw from - both in Western and Eastern philosophy and history - should we need to examine the notion in its proper historical depth, and how it evolved and took its place in the history of Christian thought.

Lastly, it is not possible for any honest reflection on contemporary reality to not come to terms with its historical antecedent. We cannot, for example, give an adequate reflection on postmodernity without coming to terms with the lessons we have learned from our confrontation with modernity. In the same token, we cannot reflect fairly on the history of American Baptists without reentering the broader matrix of Baptist history.

A Brief Acknowledgement of History

The Baptist movement came into being in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Out of that era sprung forth “Separatist” congregations that sought purity of the faith, hence the label, “Puritans.” John Smyth (1554-1612), an English Puritan preacher who first served an Anglican church, then a Separatist congregation in Gainsborough, became the first English Baptist. Because of persecution, Smyth and a group of his followers fled to Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, Smyth encountered the Mennonites, descendants of

Anabaptists, and became heavily influenced by their radical commitment to religious freedom and the baptism only of believers. Smyth reorganized his Separatist congregation which later on became the first English Baptist congregation in 1609.¹⁹

It is important to note at this point for the purpose of this essay that even within Puritanism there already was diversity in theology. The group that emerged from John Smyth's leadership was later on known as "General Baptists" that subscribed to Arminianism's belief that the atonement of Christ was not limited to a predestined elect, but is open to all. Another band of Puritans who separated themselves from the Church of England founded a congregation in England in 1633 which later on gave birth to the Baptist group identified as "Particular Baptists." This group held to a radical Calvinistic belief that only the elect were to be baptized.²⁰

The proper historical roots, therefore, of contemporary Baptists is found in Europe. Baptists, as we can imagine, made a profound impact on the religious landscape of Europe, and continue to do so today. But it was in the so-called "New World", America, where the Baptist movement exploded and became the largest strand of American Protestantism. The English Baptist, Roger Williams, came to Massachusetts in 1632. But not long after that, the "New World Puritans" that became the dominant religious establishment of "New England" forced him out of their colonies. Roger Williams fled to neighboring Rhode Island where he formed the first Baptist church in America in 1639.²¹

¹⁹ Norman H. Maring and Winthrop Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), p. 11. See also, Gentz, pp. 103-106.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

²¹ Ibid., p. 13 ff.

The years after that saw the growth of Baptist congregations. But the majority of the early New England Baptists were too few and too widely scattered across the emerging colonies. But as early as 1670 - while very incipient and “primitive” - General Baptists in America, on the one hand, had already reached out to each other to form associations, or assemblies. On the other hand, the Particular Baptists in the middle colonies especially, started meeting informally with each other. In 1707, five Particular Baptist congregations – three from New Jersey and two from Philadelphia - came together to form the Philadelphia Baptist Association.

This association was the first Baptist association that showed a formal structure and demonstrated a self-sustaining associational life. It became the “template” of associational life as other Baptist bodies that were formed after it followed the organizational pattern of the PBA.²²

The next 200 years saw formative shifts in the life of Baptists in America. The growth of Baptists in the North was not as marked as that of their counterparts in the South. Yet the impetus for community continued to find expression amongst Baptists. The American Baptist Foreign Mission Society was formed in 1814; the Publication Society in 1824, and the Home Mission Society in 1832. Politics and religion go hand in hand, inspite of claims to the contrary of one or the other. So when one looks at the history of religious movements in a particular place and time, one also invariably sees the history of politics of that period. The American Civil War drove a deep fissure in the life of Baptists in America and unleashed a schism in 1845, primarily over the issue of slavery and slave ownership not only amongst church members, but among missionaries

²² Ibid., p. 150 ff.

themselves. The Baptists in the south seceded from the main body of Baptists at that time to form the Southern Baptist Convention.²³

Theological diversity continued to evolve amongst the Baptist churches in the North and the West that are now associated with ABC. The remaining churches of the North, up until 1950, were called the Northern Baptist Convention. The years leading up to that time saw more divisions as Baptists were carried up themselves in the vortex of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies of the period between 1920 thru the late 1940's, and caused the secession of other groups from the Northern Baptist Convention (the Conservative Baptist Association of America, and the General Association of Regular Baptists).²⁴

In 1950 – primarily to come to terms with the changes in traditional geographical boundaries - the Northern Baptist Convention changed its name to the American Baptist Convention. And in 1972, the “Convention” evolved deeper in its understanding of its commitment to the notion of the local church as the “fundamental unit of mission” and changed its name to what now is called the American Baptist Churches, USA.

In my own life journey with the ABCUSA, I have come to call the ABCUSA as a “remnant” Baptist denomination – a “leftover”, as it were, of a series of divisions in its history. But I say this with much affection because in this “remnant” identity that I have discerned in its inner life, in my view, lies the very sign of its distinctive faithfulness. In my view, it is this theological paradigm – that of a “remnant” denomination - that distinguishes the ABCUSA the most amongst other mainline denominations in the U.S.

²³ Gentz, p. 104

²⁴ Gentz, pp. 103-106.

The Baptist family has many “offspring” and, therefore, many expressions. And so the question, ‘Why I am an American Baptist?’ is best answered with the prior understanding that ‘Baptist’ and ‘American Baptist’ identities are not necessarily one and the same. It has been said that American Baptists have never been *one* thing, but *many*; and therein lies much of our distinctiveness. At the heart of the American Baptist self-consciousness are *history* and *mission*.

Who American Baptists are today is, therefore, only the contemporary expression of a long history of particular persons who have responded to Christ’s call in the world in peculiar ways. And so for a vast number of American Baptists, their identity is not rooted only in organizational structure, or confessional and propositional statements; but rather is grounded in the lives and ministry of particular people who have responded to God’s call in a particular way.

The Contemporary Scene

Baptists in general around the world share some fundamental convictions. Perhaps one of the most defining of these – and formative to its very identity - is *Religious Freedom* or, as it is sometimes known, *Soul Liberty*. It can be argued that most of these fundamental convictions (local church autonomy, church-state separation, believer’s baptism, the gathered/regenerate church) find their roots in this core conviction. In addressing the State Convention in 1907, W. G. Fennell, of South Church in Newark, outlined his views on Baptist distinctives, asked the rhetorical question, “What is the truth behind all our teachings, which...makes it our contribution to history?”

To which he enjoined, “We believe it to be the Freedom and Authority of Divine Life in the Soul of Man.”²⁵

Throughout history, the foundational belief that God has given every person the dignity and the gift of freedom has permitted Baptists of every persuasion to respond freely to the world around them and appropriate their faith in light of their own understanding of Scriptures. It is this bedrock ‘Baptistic’ belief that has given rise to the variety of Baptist traditions today. Yet Baptists have also sought out to be in fellowship with one another, primarily driven by an abiding call to the “Body of Christ.” Just as abiding as its value on the independence of the local church is its commitment to not obscure the unity of the church. Some live with this “ambiguity” better than others.

The Baptist World Alliance (BWA) – of which the ABCUSA is a part - is an international fellowship of 211 Baptist unions and conventions in 120 countries. In the United States alone, there are more than 21 Baptist denominations/alliances/fellowships. The ABCUSA is composed of 34 autonomous but interrelated judicatory “Regions.” The “Regions” are analogous to the “Dioceses” or “Synods” of more hierarchical communions. In and through these regional expressions is where the ABCUSA seeks to live out what it means to strive for “unity in the midst of diversity.” The “Regions” are the visible means by which ABCUSA express its commitment to mutual respect and interdependence and, above all, its commitment to the “Body of Christ.” It is fair to say that one of the energies that animate the denomination – constructively and destructively

²⁵ Norman H. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1964) p. 283, quoting Fennell from the 1907 Annual Report of the NJBC, p. 63.

– is the perennial striving to live in the crucible of the loving tension between autonomy and interdependence.

The American Baptist Churches of New Jersey

A Brief Microscopic Retrospect

The American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, where I currently serve as associate regional pastor and area minister for central NJ, is one of the 34 autonomous but interrelated regions of ABCUSA. The story of its origin is as fascinating and complex as that of the many stories of Baptist association beginnings all across colonial America.

As was the case in the early colonial days all across the colonies, individual Baptist congregations formed where there were Baptist settlers and these were scattered all across the eastern seaboard states. Each constituted church helped to organize other churches as they were formed across the state. The desire to bring together meager resources in the harsh new world - and the realization that objectives in ministry were better realized in partnership with others than by one standing alone – gave birth to an impetus for the formation of “associations.” As the desire for fellowship and mutual support amongst individual congregations grew, “associations” of Baptist churches were forged. And, later on, associations came together to form “Societies”, as mentioned earlier.

Associations were forged and formalized along different timelines. As was cited above, the formally organized association was constituted by 5 churches from the Middle

Colonies – 3 were from New Jersey, and two from Philadelphia – and named the Philadelphia Baptist Association. The nomenclature tended to be misleading because it overlooked the fact that from the early beginning of Baptist churches in the colonies up to the end of the 18th century, there were more Baptist congregations in New Jersey than there were in Pennsylvania. The unusual geographic location of New Jersey contributed to this and a similar phenomenon took place in the northern part of the state as churches in that area were associated with the New York Baptist Association – a phenomenon that lent to the reputation that New Jersey was a state that was like a “keg tapped at both ends.”²⁶

This mode of fellowship became the pattern for New Jersey Baptists for over a century. After the Revolutionary War, changing times and spirit unleashed phenomenal growth in Baptist life. The years following 1790 saw Baptist churches in New Jersey slowly claiming their own identity, weaning themselves away from the Philadelphia Baptist Association and the New York Baptist Association. In 1811, the New Jersey Baptist Association was finally formed.²⁷

To “fast forward” in silence 195 years into history since that time is unthinkable in historiography. But since this work is not a work on history, I claim an awkward excuse to do so! The New Jersey Baptist “Association” evolved into many permutations, brought in many generations of leaders, each casting their own vision for their time. It is now called the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, one of the largest of the 35 judicatory regions of the American Baptist Churches, USA.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

The Current ABCNJ Reality

The Demographic Landscape

The state of New Jersey is the 3rd smallest state in the nation but has the 8th largest GDP. In terms of ethnic demography, New Jersey breaks down as follows, with the U.S. national figures for each category in the right hand column:²⁸

	NJ	USA
White persons, percent, 2004 (a)	76.9%	80.4%
Black persons, percent, 2004 (a)	14.5%	12.8%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons, percent, 2004 (a)	0.3%	1.0%
Asian persons, percent, 2004 (a)	7.0%	4.2%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, percent, 2004 (a)	0.1%	0.2%
Persons reporting two or more races, percent, 2004	1.2%	1.5%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2004 (b)	14.9%	14.1%
White persons, not Hispanic, percent, 2004	63.8%	67.4%

a) Includes persons reporting only one race.

b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

The region of ABCNJ is currently constituted of about 282 member churches, comprising over 70,000 members. The ethnic demography of the region closely mimics that of the state's as a whole. For example, approximately one third of ABCNJ's membership and churches is African-American. There are currently 35 churches that are

²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "State and County Quickfacts", <http://quickfacts.census.gov> (23 November 2006).

Latino, 6 Brazilian, 15 Haitian, 6 Asian, and a number of congregations that are multi-cultural congregations. In the past 10 years ABCNJ has planted, supported, and incorporated 30 new congregations – 96% of them are Brazilian and Latino. The remaining 3% are African, Haitian, and Asian.²⁹

Another demographic summary produced by National Ministries of ABCUSA (its program board for U.S. mission and ministry) in 2004 that looked at the Northeast region (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont) by County gives another perspective of the cultural metropolis that is New Jersey. For example, looking at the 2000 census which tracked immigrant population based on number of foreign-born residents, 6 New Jersey counties occupy slots in the top 20, 3 of those in the top 10.³⁰

The region is organizationally constituted by 8 associations (or, as it was called in the past, “clusters”), as follows:

1. Capital Association
2. Essex Association
3. Greater Delaware Valley Association
4. North New Jersey Association
5. North Shore Association
6. Raritan Association
7. Watchung Association

²⁹ American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, *2004 Statistics and 2005-2006 Directory: Thirty-Fifth Annual Session*, (New Jersey). All demographic data that follows in this section about region structure, constituency, and organization, is taken from this publication.

³⁰ National Ministries Research: June 2004, *Demographic Summary by County: Northeast Census Region*, pp. 1-2.

8. West New Jersey Association

The region is schematically viewed as *North Area, Central Area, and South Area*. Each area is comprised of 3 associations, except the North Area, which has only two of the largest associations in the region. While the regional ministry philosophy of ABCNJ is intentionally team-oriented, the full-time area ministers are given a designated area of the region where they are recognized as the primary pastoral resource person for the churches and pastors in that area. In my particular case, where I serve as area minister for the central churches in our region, I am primarily responsible for 3 associations (Watchung, Raritan, and Capital) comprised of roughly 90 of the region's churches and their pastors.

*The Regional Vision and Mission*³¹

The current stated vision of ABCNJ has a three-dimensional, interfacing foci: *to be Christ-centered, mission-focused, and pastoral (loving) in spirit*, as it encourages its churches and pastors to be faithful and healthy witnesses of the Gospel.

ABCNJ's regional vision is for healthy, spiritually vibrant and growing churches which are reaching out to their communities and beyond. The regional team understands that it is called to work with its churches and pastors in their own striving to understand, embrace and fulfill their spiritual journeys.

It seeks to accomplish this vision by organizing its ministries and program activities around 4 regional mission priorities:

1. Promoting faithful and healthy churches/congregations.

³¹ Information that follows is taken from recent identity piece/brochure published by ABCNJ.

2. Promoting faithful and healthy pastors and leaders.
3. Promoting faithful and healthy regional ministries.
4. Promoting faithful and healthy regional staff.

The region's stated objectives are as follows:³²

1. Personal Witness – To be faithful witnesses by word and deed, so that persons respond to God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ in all of life.
2. Social Witness – To fulfill the biblical mandates of love and justice for all people and God's creation.
3. Discipleship – to be mature disciples of Jesus Christ, obeying the biblical demands of living as the People of God in the world.
4. Leadership – To develop and support lay and professional leaders for ongoing and emerging roles in our total mission.
5. Congregational Growth – To strengthen existing congregations and establish new congregations for their ministry in the world.
6. Service – To have a caring ministry to persons and institutions of special need.
7. Stewardship – To develop and manage our human and material resources for the maximum support of mission objectives.
8. Cooperation – To function responsibly as part of the whole Body of Christ, so that the world might believe.
9. Identity – To celebrate our denominational heritage, understand and be committed to the life and mission of the American Baptist Churches, USA.

³² American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, *Statistics*, p. 86.

An “apostolic” pastoral approach is aspired to with intentionality by the regional pastoral team through its commitment to responsiveness to the needs of churches, and focus on *preaching, teaching, encouragement, and strengthening/equipping* in and amongst its churches, disciples, and pastors. This vision of regional ministry was one of the primary reasons that I was drawn to the ABCNJ, and an overriding factor in my decision to accept its call for me to serve on its staff. Its intentionality in moving away from the bureaucratic model for regional ministry into the pastoral model, the region’s approach embodies for me the biblical approach modeled by Paul’s ministry to the churches of the Gentile world.

And so it is. Herein, within the particularity of this ministry setting lays the challenge identified in this project.

CHAPTER 3

WALKING TOGETHER

A Vision of Local Church and Judicatory Partnership in the Pastoral Call Process within the American Baptist Regional Judicatory Context

Analysis of the Challenge

The challenge that is taken up in this demonstration project makes a fundamental and very specific assumption that there is a lack of a systematic and disciplined spirituality of discernment in the pastoral call process currently used by the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey for its member congregations. It needs to be stated at the outset that the chosen focus of my project also makes another fundamental assumption in that, historically and intellectually as a whole, there has been an overemphasis within Christian theologizing on the two modes of the Trinity (God and Son) at the expense of the Holy Spirit. This relative deficit in a disciplined awareness of the work of the Spirit in our lives manifests itself in various levels of congregational life – in the case of this demonstration project, in the community's manner of searching and calling for its pastor. This particular assumption is addressed in more detail later in this work.

When I joined the regional pastoral staff of ABCNJ in August of 2004, it was apparent to me that the current pastoral call process used in the region does not have a disciplined spirituality component. I came to my ministry in ABCNJ from our national

denominational office in Valley Forge, PA., where I held the position of director for missionary recruitment at International Ministries, the international mission arm of the denomination. I learned so much in my years of ministry there in the area of discerning one's call to ministry, and about the wonderful and sometimes "awe-some" adventure of clarifying one's vocation in the crucible of the interplay between mystery and finitude. When I came to ABCNJ, I was immediately drawn to this similar component of the region's ministry in the pastoral call process. In January of 2005, I conducted an all-day training workshop for five pastoral call committees from different areas of the region that were active at that time. The workshop was the first of its kind in recent memory, at least in the programmatic way that it was presented, and was attended by a total of 35 persons – all committee members. The outline of this workshop is found in Appendix B. Not knowing that I was going to be enrolling at NYTS in 2005, I did not take good care of the evaluation forms that I collected at the end of the meeting, and now I could not locate them anymore! Suffice it to say, the feedback was unanimously and overwhelmingly positive in the area of the spirituality component that they experienced in the training that day.

I selected this challenge for the demonstration project based in large part on the inspiration of, and learnings brought about by, 28 years of ministry and a personal journey of call into a diaspora experience that has illumined a personal passion for the vital importance of excellence in pastoral leadership in the community of faith. It is important to note that 19 of the 28 years of my ministry have been in executive professional ministry settings where my major operational and program responsibilities dealt (and continues to deal) directly with volunteer personnel, professional ministry

practitioner (both clergy and lay commissioned missionaries) recruitment, retention, training and support. Most important of all, my interest in this focus derives from my abiding belief that the health of a congregation is directly related to the quality and health of the pastoral leadership that it chooses. The pastoral call process is a defining milestone in the life of both pastor and people.

The region is completely uninvolved during this fundamentally formative stage of the discernment process. Consequently, regional experience through the years has invariably demonstrated that those who ultimately constitute the search committee are not always the ones who are gifted and skilled in the task. The system of selecting members of the search committee has been applied largely through the mandates of standing rules or antiquated by-laws provisions that do not take into consideration whatsoever the particular gifts that committee members ought to have for the task of discernment. And if there are no standing rules or by-laws available (as in small, traditionally informal and less organized congregations) pastoral call committee members are chosen by acclaim of, as it were, *vox populi*, and through “volunteerism of the willing”, rather than through “conscription” by way of identifiable gifts.

It has not been uncommon, therefore, that the pastoral call committees ultimately are populated by the most influential and/or powerful members of the congregation, those “appointed” or favored by the powerful and the influential, or by its highest financial supporters.

This demonstration project develops an entirely new training module that will be added to the current pastoral call process utilized by ABCNJ for its member

congregations. This current process is the recognized national denominational instrument and is currently being used by the vast majority of the 34 regional judicatories of ABCUSA, including ABCNJ (see Appendix E). This instrument is comprised of several stages. The instrument, however, is largely designed for *an already formed pastoral call committee* (see Introduction page, Appendix E). Moreover, the instrument even encourages that the congregation form, appoint or elect a pastoral call committee as soon as pastoral vacancy is made known (page 8, Appendix E). An outline of the entire pastoral call process can be found on page five of the same Appendix. On that outline, one can easily see that, based on the trajectory of the current protocol, the judicatory body comes in actively only after the member congregation has already formed its own pastoral call committee. By the time the current system brings in the region to engage the congregational process, the pastoral call committee has already been formed.

The new model that this demonstration project has created, among other things, brings in the region *prior* to the congregation taking action to select the members of its pastoral call committee. It will also introduce a pedagogical process of conscientization on a spirituality of discernment on the congregational level that will temper the current approach of regulation, prediction and organization that is fostered by a selection process devoid of a spirituality framework.

Since the pastoral call committee's make-up is the focus of this project, I conducted a survey of all the pastors currently serving in the member congregations of ABCNJ. The purpose of the survey was to canvass key components of their experience with their respective pastoral call committees that facilitated their candidacies. The survey was sent to a total of 280 pastors with email addresses listed in the regional

professional registry. There were 89 completed responses returned, which reflects a 32% response rate. For any survey, this is an above average response rate. The survey had ten questions (see Appendix A for complete and detailed results).

The result of Question #10 of the survey shows that only 28% of the pastors in the region reported being convinced that all the members of the pastoral call committee that processed his/her call possessed the requisite gifts and skills to be on the committee. Just as telling is the fact that 17% reported that 1-2 members did not possess the gifts and skills to be on the committee; and a disturbing 11% reported that 3-4 members were not qualified! Based on the average size of pastoral call committees in ABCNJ, that amounts to at least 50% of the total number of committee members. Simply put, 11% of pastors surveyed were handled by pastoral call committees at least half of whose membership did not possess the gifts and skills to be on the committee in the first place.

Logically, however, this begs the question for me as to the state of health of the pastor herself/himself who is reporting the data. What does it say then about a pastor's gifts and skills, and fit with the congregation he/she now serves, if that pastor was ultimately chosen by a committee half of whose membership were not qualified to be on it in the first place? But that is for another demonstration project to investigate! All together, 29% of pastors reported that at least one member of the pastoral call committee that worked with them was not fit to be on such a committee. This number is not acceptable.

Another area of concern that the survey disclosed is the data from Question #6: "Describe the overall experience of your call process in the congregation that you now serve." To that question, 12% of responding pastors report that their call process was

strictly a job interview. This is another unacceptable number. It will be an interesting corollary research to ascertain what the state of the pastor-congregation relationships is like in the churches where these pastors now serve.

Many clear problems have been manifested in pastoral call committees whose membership has not been carefully selected according to demonstrable gifts fitted for the task. There are three salient ones that I would like to lift up.

First, legalistic and rigid thinking is counter-intuitive to the inherent complexity not only of the task, but of the subject and object of the process itself, namely, the complexity of the screening committee member and the pastoral candidate as human organisms, and the complexity of the spiritual and theological reality of the discernment process. This characteristic lends itself to a negative bias on the part of the committee member which, in my experience, affects – among other things – even routine processes such as analyzing and interpreting information. On the other hand, one can still be a legalistic thinker and be relatively rigid in persona, but at the same time be dialogical and circumspect. Just as importantly, this particular characteristic also needs to be examined on the level of the committee member's value system and life experience from where attitude and behavior emanate.

When viewed from a systems perspective, a person is never an isolate. As human beings, we are acting and re-acting members of a social group. And because of this, our experience is determined by our interaction with our environment. Our context directly influences our internal world and the processes of our mind, which in turn shape the way

we interact with our external world.³³ An inviolable fact of being human is that we are made to be *in relationship*. We thrive in social groups. Our selfhood and sense of identity have two fundamental components: a sense of being part of a group, and a sense of being separate. Where these two fundamental experiences are blended or separated to form an *identity* is in the alchemy of the family.³⁴

Second, the decision-making process that the average congregation is used to has a lot of limitations when it comes to engaging a spirituality of discernment. Danny Morris and Charles Olsen in *Discerning God's Will Together* identify these limitations in a very clear-eyed way.³⁵ On the level of the pastoral call committee, a microcosm of the congregational reality takes place. Because of the uniqueness of individual members in the committee, the activity of screening pastoral candidates invariably has to go through a variety of hermeneutical perspectives represented in the committee. In Bellah, for example, we find again the critical role that the particularity of one's culture plays within a group, because a gathered group is a cornucopia of cultures, "those patterns of meaning that any group or society uses to interpret and evaluate itself."³⁶

These are a lot of lenses and filters through which apprehended information about a pastoral candidate must go through and from where, ultimately, a consensus needs to emerge. The endeavor is further made that much more challenging when we realize that

³³ For a superior resource on this systems issue, see Salvador Minuchin's seminal work, *Families and Family Therapy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), especially in Chapter 1 where he lays out the fundamental predicates of his theory.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46 ff.

³⁵ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Bethesda: Alban Publications, 1997), pp12-16.

³⁶ Bellah, p. 333 ff. For a powerful and in-depth analysis of the hermeneutical implications of one's social and cultural location, see Fernando F. Segovia, "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse," *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, vol. II (F.F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. pp.1-17, 347-361.

ministry as a whole (as I argued in Chapter One), and the process of screening and selecting a pastoral candidate, involve finding the points of convergence of several – but intertwining – factors that are inherently present in both the pastoral candidate and the members of the pastoral call committee who represent the congregation, which in and of itself is just as complex.

A member whose personal journey has not brought her/him to a reasonably self-aware and differentiated stage in life can derail a committee's progress. One, for example, may respond contrary to the gathering consensus among the other members of the committee not because of contravening new data, but because of a subconscious or latent life experience now elicited by the candidate. This dynamic in the decision making process in committees can go the exact opposite direction, where one member's observations and opinions become a symbol of a perceived "threat" to the dominant ideology of the "institution" or to a hidden agenda. In effect, this one member suddenly becomes the catalyst for the galvanizing of contrary opinion by the rest of the committee, regardless of the sobriety and validity of this one member's contribution to the discernment process.

In cases like this, the committee is stopped on its tracks when there is dissenting opinion, even if in the first instance just mentioned the opinion is in the minority. This seems to be the "dark side" of consensus, when even one, or all except one, withholds assent and in effect "kills" the whole process by preventing it from moving forward. While a pastoral call committee always strives for consensus, a healthy committee seeks further dialogue when there is dissent. Where there is no possibility for consensus, a healthy committee adjusts by seeking common ground. I use *common ground* in its sense

of agreement reached around a core issue, but assumes and accepts disagreements to exist around peripheral or secondary issues.

Third, the psychological dimension understandably becomes the instinctive and prevailing ideology in any committee. After all, as human beings we are the psychological sum of all our experiences. A pastoral search committee that has not been conscientized or trained in the spirituality of the discernment process may not be able to look beyond their natural predilections to react in a certain way to particular personality types represented in the pastoral candidates they are screening. Because different personalities evoke different responses in us, this tendency causes a disproportionate application of standards on personalities that “rub” a particular committee member in the “wrong way.” I have observed this dynamic in almost every committee with which I have worked. This undifferentiated tendency in group dynamics creates a group mindset that truncates the group’s attention primarily to the relatively superficial characteristics of a pastoral candidate.

The new training module that is developed by this project which will be outlined in Chapter 6, will be positioned as the *first stage* in the way ABCNJ will deploy the pastoral call discernment instrument. This strategic positioning will bring the judicatory body (ABCNJ region) earlier into the process than the current system allows. While there is no absolute guarantee that a pastor-congregation relationship will flourish into a fruitful and mature partnership, it is my contention that the *genetic matrix* for the health of such a relationship can be apprehended by a discerning community that is grounded in an attentive and growing theology of the Spirit right at the point of its journey where it is contemplating a call of new pastoral leadership. The spiritual benefits that can come from

a transformation in this arena of communal life will move the congregation forward in growth towards the way of the Spirit who calls us to embrace the innate ambiguities that we encounter in the journey of discerning God's will within our finite reality, and invites us to see meaning even in the midst of seeming contradictions. It is the requisite way towards spiritual formation and to growing closer into the image of Christ.

And so it is of vital importance that the process utilized in the search and selection of pastoral leadership is not only cognizant of the proper procedures involved in selecting the most qualified candidate, but also aware of the formative and ethereal power of the complex dynamics at play in an experience that actually has an innate spiritual character at its very core and, by the very nature of its subject, cannot be an end unto itself.

A Way Forward

This new approach will invariably have to come to terms with the fiercely held Baptist value of the autonomy of the local church (see Chapter 2) and the dominant political tradition within American Baptist congregations that determine the dispensation of power and influence. American Baptists are congenitally allergic to any form of attempt that in their perspective may challenge their perceived *auto nomos* or "self-rule." But a more creative partnership between region and local church is always possible. Just as American Baptists instinctively react against threats to their soul freedom, so do they instinctively resonate with appeals to their freedom to voluntarily associate if they choose to do so.

In introducing the new method in ABCNJ's pastoral call process, it has been vitally important to pastorally inform local churches about the new process. It is a new experience for ABCNJ local churches, when they call the region office asking for help to begin the search for a new pastor, to hear that they must first begin with a discernment workshop/retreat before they do anything else, such as select a pastoral call committee. Of course, a few of those who have called during the implementation period of this project already has formed their search committees. But with those who call and have not yet formed a search committee, I have received nothing but positive cooperation when they were told not to select members of the pastoral call committee yet until after the discernment workshop/retreat. It needs to be said, however, that I make the case for the new method not by ecclesiastical fiat, but in a way that the church leader or officer who calls is made to feel respected, invited to see that the process is for their sake, that their congregation is better served when the pastoral call process is a positive and not a frustrating experience, and that a disciplined discernment exercise is an important first step in undertaking a deeply spiritual journey. Each church leader's personality is different; and some are more difficult to convince, especially those who already have a vested interest in being on the committee. But the point I am trying to emphasize here is that crafting an agreement through dialogue and pastoral sensitivity is a cultural quality that is found deep in the wellspring of the traditions of American Baptists. Here is why.

The call to "strive first for the kingdom of God" is an abiding reminder for me that the primary task of the church is mission. Ours is the call to participate in God's yet unfinished work of love in the world. In fact the church *is* mission. Herein lies the mystery: that it is in the giving of ourselves that we find our life!

It is also important to note that in recent years the phrase, *unity in diversity*, (or “motto”, as some now describe it dismissively) has been seen with some cynicism by some sectors within the ABCUSA that see this issue as no more than romanticized platitude. Yet I am convinced that in the very crucible of the current dilemma lie the practical resources for our churches to reach this realizable hope, and what I consider a gospel mandate. A clear-eyed and sober look at the community (never mind the world) around us reveals a radically globalized environment. In this environment peoples - and churches – have had to come to terms (or decide not to) with the many-ness and multi-layeredness of our communities and our world.

Diversity and pluralism are the natural offspring of globalization and many say that the emphasis on “inclusiveness” in our denomination is primarily driven by politics and economics. An aspect of this viewpoint is correct; in that our faith needs to be appropriated in the community of relationships and it is in this community where politics and economics are essential realities of living. And it is true that our faith through history has always had to come to terms with its context and had to appropriate the faith within the particular age wherein it had to live. Consequently, in this our present age, churches and peoples are confronted with the stark reality of a pluralized world and as I mentioned earlier, it confronts even the unwilling.

Yet beyond - and even prior to - politics and economics, the community called by Jesus is mandated to be inclusive; in fact, radically so. The nature of the church and of the Christian community in our biblical tradition *requires* its participants to be inclusive. “I am the Vine and you are the Branches”, Jesus said, clearly illustrating to the disciples that one of the characteristics of his community is one of interconnectedness of its

participants with each other in spiritual intimacy. This requirement is radicalized by Jesus in his own prayer for unity of his disciples, “that they may be one as you and I are one.” In this personal intercession, Jesus equates and grounds this hope in the very nature of his own relationship with God! This mandate is pastorally crystallized by the apostle Paul especially in his letter to the churches in Ephesus, where he uses the “Body of Christ” metaphor (Ephesians 4) to illustrate the identity of the community of Jesus.

Furthermore, Paul says that “in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the lord” (Eph. 2: 21), because Jesus has “broken down the walls of hostility...he is our peace” (Eph. 2: 14 ff.). It is the very will of God to “gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). In his letter to the churches of Colossae, Paul reminds the fractious churches of the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ in the whole cosmos, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). Is unity possible in diversity? Not only is it possible in Christ, it is required by Christ! This *pentecostal* diversity of God’s people is one of the signatures of creation. Diversity is not merely a postmodern economic and political problem for the churches. Diversity itself is a gift from God.

The biblical model of the community of Jesus is counter-cultural to the materialistic vision of secular society. In Matthew 6: 25 and ff., Jesus understands the human preoccupation to the primacy of material wealth and security – expressions of an *ethic of control*. But there Jesus announces the priority behavior in the new community that he is calling: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” The secular, materialistic vision of success presupposes the elimination of obstacles to its understanding of community as “stability.”

Translated in the community of human relationships this means, among other things, creating and maintaining homogenous environments where everybody think alike, look the same, eat the same food, live around the same neighborhood, experience God in the same, exact way, etc.

And so from a biblical point of view, “unity in diversity” for American Baptists also says at the same time that there must be “diversity in unity.” In this understanding, one cannot be separated from the other and both are made possible in the community of Jesus through the celebrated interdependence of the different parts of the body, united in Christ. Here is one of the visible signs of a spirit-centered community: its members are deeply aware of their interdependence precisely because they have seen the critical point where they are necessarily connected, and that is through a common call. The practices of love, justice, liberation, fidelity in relationships – life-blood of an *ethic of inclusion* – are conditions for community and the experience of the transformed life in Christ.

In the community of Jesus we are required and called to practice loving the one who we do not have much in common with, or even the unlovable. It is a community that is living and breathing, alive and empowered by *Agape* and thus fearless enough to adjust to the newcomer and the different. In God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, God’s decisive act of reconciliation is begun. In Christ, humanity is reconciled to God. The spiritual community, or the church, represents this unity in the world through the coming of the Spirit. It is in and through the church that the world comes to see the reconciling love of God in Christ. It is granted to us that it is in God’s kingdom of the spirit where the cross’ dialectic of love dwells. I believe deeply that American Baptists are uniquely gifted to be witnesses to this love.

Yet it remains foundationally important that the framework for a spirituality of the congregational pastoral call process in ABCNJ be, indeed, grounded in a mature appreciation of what it *means* to discern God's will. This is what the next chapter attempts to do.

CHAPTER 4

HERE AM I

Biblical and Spiritual Insights on a Spirituality of Discernment

“Dear Lord, let your Spirit give me the power to overcome all hesitation, to take away all fear, and to remove all shyness...Let it allow me to experience your presence not only through the darkness of faith but also through new sensitivities that allow me to see, hear, taste, touch and even smell a reality that reaches beyond what my natural senses perceive.”³⁷

St. Basil the Great once said, “Let us not be afraid in being too extravagant in what we say about the Holy Spirit (because) our thoughts will always fall short.”³⁸ Henri Nouwen’s prayer cited above expresses a more contemporary affirmation of St Basil’s insight into the nature or mode of God’s continuing presence in the world. Better yet, when Jesus described to Nicodemus the sovereign freedom of the Spirit, that “we know not where it comes from or where it goes (John 3:8)”, Jesus also at the same time delineated the path that the life of faith will have to tread, that to follow God’s will requires a new way of seeing, a “third eye” so to speak. The goal of the journey of the life of faith is God’s will for one’s life, a summons to a destiny that is not guided by Mapquest, but by a spiritual gyroscope that is operated by a paradoxical interplay of parts that are at the same time from time and eternity i.e., faith and trust working tensively with the inherent limitations of finite signposts.

³⁷ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee*, (Garden City: Image Books, 1981), p. 121.

³⁸ Cited in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 51.

But discovering and discerning God's call in our lives presents a great difficulty for most of us. It is not easy to describe God's will for our lives, and how we experience God's presence intersecting with our journeys. Rational thought is inadequate for describing our experience of God's presence in our lives, never mind *describing* what God wills for our lives. The questions, "What is God calling me to do?", and "What is God calling me to be?" – fundamental questions of life's meaning and purpose - are profoundly spiritual yearnings.

We need a new synthetic language, or "esperanto", that can help describe and access what really is a spiritual reality coexisting with time and history. But language has to come out of a context. We need a framework from which to build an appropriate language. Sometimes this requires "deconstructing" some of the ways we currently view and understand the world. A sobering story about the limits of our finite perspectives is told by Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset:

(Commander) Peary relates that on his polar trip he traveled one whole day toward the north, making his sleigh dogs run briskly. At night he checked his bearings to determine his latitude and noticed with great surprise that he was much further south than in the morning. He had been toiling all day toward the north on an immense iceberg drawn southwards by an ocean current.³⁹

Our apprehension and experience of reality is inextricably influenced by our innately finite environment. And it is in our nature that we instinctively calibrate our fixed points of reference as *absolute* within and around this environment. What Jesus told Nicodemus that night was to say that if he was to walk in the way of the Spirit, he needed

³⁹ Cited in Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 2.

a “third eye”, the ability to discern and a new way of seeing,⁴⁰ and a new language of the soul, a radically different *absolute*.

Signs, Patterns and Fruits

An important place to begin is with a new definition and understanding of *call* and *vocation*. The weight of tradition has assigned call as the exclusive privilege only of the clergy or the missionary. And those who were “called” were the ones who usually lead us in our spiritual affairs. Vocation, on the other hand, has been commonly associated with our skills and gifts, what we in large part love to do and yet get paid in doing so. And so it has not been difficult to understand why *call* and *vocation* are commonly conflated as one and the same.

When examined in its etymological roots, however, a different kind of “conflation” is found. The root of the word “vocation” is the Latin, “vocare”, which literally means a “call”, a “summons.” In this sense, a call logically assumes a caller, one who summons. Understood in this context, the whole notion of “call” is much larger than work, and far broader than one’s material and utilitarian contribution to society. From this vantage point, the goal of “call” is never only the achievement of remunerated work.⁴¹

Call is best understood in its spiritual context. It is not, and never has been, merely the work we do from day to day to day. In the case of the pastoral call discernment process, “call” is never merely an act of an employer hiring an employee. In

⁴⁰ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, calls it “a capacity to see...to discern is to see through the essence of a matter.” p. 18.

⁴¹ Gilbert Meilaender. “Divine Summons.” *Christian Century* (November 1, 2000, pp. 1110-1118), p. 1110.

the biblical tradition, call speaks of the summons of God that comes in the life journeys of persons; in this case, to both pastor and people. Call is God's invitation to meaning and purpose. It is never decisively complete, but incessantly draws us to it nonetheless, its joy being in its pursuit. The insight of C.S. Lewis guides us thusly when he said, "To follow the vocation does not mean happiness; but once it has been heard, there is no happiness for those who do not follow."⁴²

A spirituality of the pastoral call process, therefore, is inextricably linked to a vital consciousness of the activity of the Spirit in the life of the community of faith. The Spirit is *ruach*, God's "breath" and is the one who came upon the deep and from that nothingness called forth creation. It is the Spirit who, in the gospel narratives, "calls" Jesus and convinces him that not only is he God's anointed one, but also an only and beloved son.⁴³ It is the Spirit who gives form to God's wisdom:

But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him", these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.⁴⁴

Herein lies the challenge; because it is in this area of ecclesial life that the organized local church is most wanting. Molly T. Marshall, in compelling fashion, calls for "recovering the Spirit":

Both intellectual heritage and theological interpretations have conspired against understanding Spirit as the mode of God's presence in the world, the life-giving power in which all participate...The deep sigh of the church is for a renewed awareness of the work of the Spirit in our lives and in this fragile world...(but) regulating, suppressing,

⁴² Ibid., p. 1111.

⁴³ Jules J. Toner, S.J., *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Guide to Principles and Practice*, (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), p. 3.

⁴⁴ I Corinthians 2: 7-10.

and ordering have often been the church's response to the lively and unpredictable movement of the Spirit.⁴⁵

The de facto deficiency of the church in pneumatology is not new. Marshall cites Gregory of Nazianzus, who coined the term, *theos agraptos*, "the God about whom nobody writes."⁴⁶ The elusiveness of the Spirit has eluded attempts at systematization. Just as it has happened in Christian theology, so does it happen in the local church. A church that is preoccupied with order and control, and has gotten used to the sense of security that predictability brings, is instinctively threatened by this elusiveness and may unwittingly only suppress the dynamic ways of the Spirit in its communal discourse, liturgy and practice.

A growing spirituality, first and foremost, is one that embraces humility, the awareness that God knows our hearts deeper than we do about it. Our biblical and faith tradition never sees us as attaining complete understanding of God's will ahead of its fulfillment. We can only strive to act on our best understanding and insight of what that will is, and then test it against the criteria of the teachings not only of persons in scripture about their experience and decisions when faced with God's summons, but on Jesus' powerfully simple teachings on discernment, "You will know them by their fruits (Matt. 7: 15-20)." Jesus always taught his disciples about the vital importance of discernment. It was a pedagogy of simple equation but one that bore transformative practical power: "...Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit."

⁴⁵ Molly T. Marshall, *Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), pp. 2-3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Here Jesus points to a radically new *absolute, signs*, of a moral order wherein the consequences of our actions are adjudicated by the law of God's love and intention for all of creation. It is a moral order suffused, nourished, re-created and revitalized by the continuing and universal ministry of the Holy Spirit in the world. St. Paul ultimately built his ethics on this foundational teaching of Jesus when he pointed to the "fruits" or signs, as it were, of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22-23 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - as the manifestation of the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence in a person and in a community. It is important to note that in the region-wide pastors' survey that was conducted for this project, the vast majority responded "all of the above" when asked what fruit(s) of the Spirit they considered essential for discernment (Appendix A).

And so Molly T. Marshall's recent reiteration of the vital agenda of "recovering the Spirit" is crucial for any church and any Christian if they are to be grounded in a growing understanding of the sometimes gentle, sometimes seismic, ways that the Holy Spirit moves and "dances" with and through our lives and through the community of faith. This is not, however, an "understanding" derived from the accumulation of more information, but rather a conscious and intentional embracing of the mystery and wonder of God being present now in the Spirit. A growing spirituality is one that never arrives at complete understanding. The biblical witness is unequivocal in teaching that omniscience is not the goal of the spiritual life.

I submit that *the very practice of engaging this journey* becomes the cornerstone of spirituality. The *attitude* itself lays the foundation for spirituality. Specifically, a spirituality of the pastoral call process that a congregation engages in begins in a

disciplined awareness that what it may interpret as God's will may actually not be. This is difficult to integrate in the self-understanding of a congregation that has not embraced this practice in its life.

The insight of the Jesuit, Jules J. Toner is straight to the point:

Not all good thoughts and affections in our hearts are the work of the Holy Spirit...The direct promptings of the Holy Spirit...arise within our complex flowing, conscious life that is hidden from all but God and self; and they have to be distinguished from our own spontaneous impulses (egoistic or generous), and from the prompting of our environment (good or bad) or of the evil spirit.⁴⁷

But God's will for us as prompted by the Holy Spirit is always good, always for our growth and benefit, because that desire comes from love. So, in recovering a growing spirituality that illuminates its pastoral call process, how does the discerning community distinguish the promptings of the Holy Spirit from the urgings of other spirits?

There are numerous excellent works and writings that have explored the nature of discernment in the context of spirituality. The literature landscape covering the academic and pastoral field of spirituality and spiritual discernment is vast, spanned by the thoughts and reflections of the classicists on one end, and contemporary contemplatives on the other. My attempt here is simply to point to a few of these works with the hope that, by doing so, I will only frame the landscape that beckons further study.

The yearning for meaning and coherence of our seemingly disconnected internal insights and external experiences - that these, indeed, are overseen and woven purposely by a loving Holy Spirit - is "a deep sigh of the church."⁴⁸ there are two relatively recent works that have resonated with my own growing understanding of how the Holy Spirit

⁴⁷ Toner, p.1.

⁴⁸ Marshall, p. 2.

meets us in our spiritual journeys, and how growing in that understanding enables us to grow deeper in spiritual insight into what I would call the *faithful constancy* of the Holy Spirit's loving activity. In his book, *Endless Possibilities*, Lee B. Spitzer offers a spiritual journey paradigm based on goal-oriented spiritual journeying. In his examination of biblical material and narratives, he has identified certain recurring patterns that teach us how God relates with and directs our journeys through life. His model has organized these patterns into five phases as constitutive phenomenological stages of the Christian journey (preparation, call, cooperation, reaching the goal, new life). These phases describe the progress we make existentially or experientially, but do not necessarily proscribe the specific content of the journey. The specific content of a journey is encapsulated in its own unique theme, which is God-given.⁴⁹

According to Spitzer, there two levels of this goal-oriented spiritual journey. The first is the "redemptive level", which embraces goals related to personal or corporate wholeness and spiritual growth. The second is the "mission-level", whose goal is not centered on one's growth, but on others for the sake of the kingdom of God.⁵⁰ Spitzer sees the progress toward fulfilling both redemptive and mission level journeys happening according to the five phases. But he also speaks of spiritual journeys going astray, when it enters what he calls a "shadow journey", one that draws persons away from God's loving will for them.⁵¹

Another model is presented by the work of Marjory Zoet Bankson in *The Call to the Soul*. Like Spitzer, Bankson examines closely "call narratives" in the Bible and then

⁴⁹ Lee B. Spitzer, *Endless Possibilities: Exploring the Journeys of Your Life*, (Lincoln: Spiritual Journey Press, 1997), pp. 8-25.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp.40-42.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp.83-85.

extracts a pattern that weaves through all the stories and experiences of call of significant personalities in scripture. She explores extensively the nature of “call”, and then identifies a pattern in the human responses of these personalities. Bankson organizes this pattern that she sees being repeated in all the “call” narratives into a six-stage cycle (resist, reclaim, revelation, risk, relate, release) with a crossing point in the middle she calls the “Poison River”, where the choice to either trust the call or avoid it takes place. She then integrates these stages with the tasks of adult life and demographic groupings identified by developmental psychologists.⁵²

What the local church needs in the effort at constructing a spirituality of the pastoral call process is to intentionally enter into a journey of growing in the understanding of the meaning of discerning God’s will. Both these contemporary works are helpful in formulating a “blueprint” for how to appreciate the *faithful constancy* of the all too often elusive ways of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith.

A Gospel Model for Spiritual Discernment and an Ignatian Response

A. John Chapter 4

Identifying signs, patterns and fruits of the Spirit in the journeys of individuals and groups clearly offer vital structural guides in the construction of a framework for a spirituality of discernment. In my own reflections on the teachings of scripture, Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well found in John’s gospel Chapter 4 offers not only a powerful biblical paradigm but also a rich repository of spiritual insight into the nature of spiritual discernment itself. After all, it is Jesus himself who is the primary interlocutor in

⁵² Marjory Zoet Bankson, *The Call to the Soul: Six Stages of Spiritual Development*, (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, Inc., 1999), especially pages 17-32.

this narrative. Here I will pay more attention to Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman with the goal of identifying some important elements of his discernment methodology in the discourse. In identifying those elements, it is my intention to articulate and visualize the methodological starting points of such elements which in turn will serve as reinforcing foundation for the construction of a framework for a spirituality of discernment.

The narrative in John 4 about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman outlines several important thematic layers that implicate the issue of the complexity of the context of ministry that I discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Three. I will try to make a proposal here that the New Testament narratives, in this case John 4, already anticipate this reality and, if I would be so careless to say, even imply that this reality is not dilemmic but rather serves as the very interpretive matrix of a capacious spirituality of discernment.

The history between Jews and Samaritans was historically complex and profoundly imbedded in each one's cultural psyche. Jews have long suspected the religious and cultural "impurity" of their Samaritan counterparts and any interaction with them was prohibited on the basis of the Levitical laws on ritual defilement. Yet, and even more so with this history as the backdrop, the evangelist indicates in the narrative that the first act of Jesus, in the encounter with this difference, is to directly and immediately engage himself in personal interaction with the Samaritan woman in a spontaneous and unsettling encounter that subjugated their respective differences. It was so unsettling that his disciples complained (as they were apt to do!). We are informed by the presenting fact

(a Samaritan woman) that these differences normally serve as barriers to social interaction with Jews.

But Jesus' request, "Give me a drink," made prior to any consideration of these barriers and the conditions that they normally would have imposed upon the encounter, introduces a supervening practice that now brings into critique the conditionality of human response to another human's need in that particular cultural milieu. At this point of the narrative the restraints already seem insurmountable, i.e., using the Samaritan's cup means ritual defilement, not to mention the fact that engaging in conversation with a woman is traditionally a waste of time at that time for a Rabbi. But agape, the operative ethic of the new reality actualized in the person of Jesus, is unbounded goodwill which occurs above the plane of, and counter to, the enslaving oppression of the human condition. When practiced in relation to otherness, to the different, the not-like-me, agape liberates the interlocutors of such a conversation in waiting, and situates them on a terrain where life is experienced in the dynamic of goodwill.

Thus, as one through whom God has enfleshed this new reality, Jesus is heard by the evangelist saying to the woman: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink'...." This is to say that if the Samaritan woman were to know and experience the new order personified in Jesus, she would be required to respond to need no longer on the basis of the limits imposed by the prejudices of her social location.

And so a salient trait of Christian spirituality, one that is prior to anything else, is one of *reflexive engagement*. This act is characterized by the actual, and the personal participation of the Christian practitioner in concrete acts of ethical reflection, i.e.,

reflection that leads to action. As a first act, it is a prior requirement - and legitimating criterion - for any "God-talk."

The trait of reflexive engagement also implies that Christian spirituality is experienced and evidenced in its very practice. It is, as a consequence of reordered relationships, the fruit of "work." The experience of the Holy Spirit provides a radically new basis for contemplating God. It is radical because in the Word made flesh, the divine presence and the contemplation of such presence moved beyond law, ritual, and thought, into the living person of Jesus who now enters the crucible of life through the Holy Spirit with extravagant goodwill, agape.

The sudden and abrupt change of subject in the narrative beginning in verse 16 signals another spirituality theme for Christian practice, namely, that *materiality is fundamentally provisional* in the context of the new reality actualized in the life of Jesus. This also means that the multiplicity of ideological infrastructures that are built upon this materiality no longer hold absolute control over a life lived in faith. At this juncture the full narrative intent of the evangelist becomes obvious, i.e., to convey that the life of faith is lived in a rearranged social order the life-forming dynamics of which are driven by the free-acting agape spirit of God, and not by the determinate boundaries of sociality. Thus, the evangelist introduces this jarring intersection where all of a sudden Jesus changes the subject of his conversation in order to bring the dialogue back to the greater spiritual plane already being hinted at.

The woman, by force of her frame of reference, continued to respond to Jesus' offer of "living water" in a strictly physical way by inferring from it physical water which will magically eradicate bodily thirst. Jesus' insight into a non-physical aspect of her

persona dislocates her consciousness into a new configuration more susceptible to the spiritual subject being introduced. The point of the narrative now is that no one can participate in the new reality seen in Jesus, and experience the qualitatively new life that it affords, if the absolutized norms and standards of materiality continue to ensconce the individual. One cannot participate in this new reality while remaining within the present state of affairs. Hence, "no one puts new wine into old wineskins." Living water connotes a dynamism that is quite incompatible to ordinary water's proscribed biological function.

Living water, used metaphorically as an extension of the Christ reality, is life set in motion to live in pursuit of God's loving purpose. As such, the nature of this life does not permit it to be content with the present order of things nor with its corresponding ideologies. Its driving force is hope and promise and therefore is eschatological in its view of ultimacy. But this eschatology does not disembody such life from the corporeality of the present. Actualized in the personal life of Jesus, in whom present and future are one and the same, it is reflexively engaged. The assured promise of an emancipated future serves, for the life lived in Christ, as the power dynamic for its critique of the forces that prevent a radical and joyful trust in God.

Jesus' first act was astonishing to the woman in its utter disregard of the social taboos (in this case, gender and ethnicity) that, if left unchallenged in such a milieu, served as natural and socially legitimated barriers between them. The radical moral significance of that act dismantled yet another absolutized construct of materiality, i.e., physical need as ultimate basis of ethical action. The woman cannot recognize the personhood of Jesus and experience the Christ reality for as long as standards of

materiality and its various ideologies remain as the absolute prism through which she sees life. Only insight into the subexternal ("Go, call your husband and come here") can initiate liberation from ideological structures that construct a reality that hinders a vital and growing spirituality grounded in the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note that the evangelist at this juncture is portraying a very significant theological point. Jesus' debunking of the absolutized authority of the proscribed social boundaries between Jews and Samaritans, men and women, symbolize the radical revaluing of human constructs in ways that these are realigned to serve the loving purpose of God. The physical world and the spiritual world of the Christ reality that is animated by the Holy Spirit exist in transformative interplay the movements and ethic of which are shaped and empowered by a vision of the future that rests only in God. And so a life lived within this reality cannot but question the structures of the present, calling it to account for its ultimates and doing so constantly because it is a life on a journey towards a future secured already in God.

Our Johannine narrative announces another spirituality theme which I believe plays a crucial role in Christian practice. This is quickly seen in the woman's attempt to follow the prophetic and spiritual insight of Jesus into her personal life by posing before him a larger spiritual issue concerning the disparate views on worship held by Jews and Samaritans. Instead Jesus announces the time, now here, that people will worship God in spirit and truth, a state of affairs characteristic only of the Messianic Age. Thus, the woman responds by affirming her belief in this coming Messiah, and voices her own hope that when this age comes such a reality will be possible. Then the narrative's final point is made. Jesus says, "I who speak to you am he." The form of the narrative is such,

and is consistent with other Johannine material, that Jesus is understood as the actualization of truth. A closer look at the nature of this word is helpful.

The Greek word *Alethea*, translated in English as "truth," is used in the Johannine literature primarily to convey the idea of reality in contrast to falsehood or mere reality. C.H. Dodd, Rudolph Bultmann, and others, have helped illuminate this interpretation by saying that the Johannine trait of fusing truth with Jesus makes a distinct effort of conveying the belief that, in revelation, Christ *is* both truth and reality.⁵³ As Christ, Jesus is the revealed reality of God. In this sense, Jesus in the narrative does not simply state the truth. He *is* truth. He *is* reality!

The themes on spiritual discernment that I have identified in John Chapter 4 illustrate that Christian spirituality is reflexively engaged, sees materiality as provisional, and understands truth only in relation to God's reality revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

B. An Ignatian Response

Ignatius of Loyola, Spanish priest and chief founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), is considered to be the preeminent teacher of spiritual discernment, and is remembered primarily as a gifted spiritual director. His work is vast, and I am not even going to be so pretentious in using the subtitle above to indicate that I have understanding of his works anywhere near to being mildly considerable. I only want to highlight, in the context of the argument I am making in this chapter, the premise of his most famous

⁵³ Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 883-893

Spiritual Exercises,⁵⁴ a collection of prayers, reflections on spiritual experiences, and disciplined spiritual exercise and guidelines intended to make a person more open to the Holy Spirit and be closer to Jesus.

Ignatius, arguably more than others, has formulated the most complete and practically helpful set of guidelines or “exercises” for discernment. His set of “rules” is considered to be the most widely used in the field.⁵⁵ The *Spiritual Exercises* were designed to be carried out over a period of “four weeks” within the context of a retreat. Each “week” contains meditations, reflections or contemplations on various spiritual topics and human experiences, and this famous work easily merits its own doctoral project! Suffice it to say, in reading the work I find it reasonable to say that the insight that eventually shaped his *Spiritual Exercises* came from his own spiritual experience that, beyond the elusiveness of the Spirit, there is a *method* to the Spirit’s ways that is characterized by “signs, patterns and fruits.” The ways of the Spirit in the Ignatian model can be appreciated through a particular ordering or trajectory of spiritual disciplines.

What is of more interest to me in the context of this project is the emphasis found in the Ignatian tradition on the need for a *guide* in spiritual discernment. Toner sees Ignatius in this way, as someone so rarely gifted to discern spirits. He says that if we are to be open to the Holy Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to us, we must be able to cooperate with the Spirit’s leading in many ways. But this is very difficult for many because “what comes from the Holy Spirit easily remains at the periphery of

⁵⁴ For a complete translation of the complete work from the original language of the autograph, see, for example, Louis J. Puhl, S.J., trans. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, (Westminster, MD.: The Newman Press, 1954).

⁵⁵ Toner, in the author’s Preface, p. xvi.

attention and sinks into a confused flow of multitudinous elements in consciousness.”⁵⁶

He continues, “How do I tell when it is the Holy Spirit speaking and not merely myself or the world or the evil spirit?”⁵⁷ And so Toner, in setting the premise of the great place of Ignatius in Jesuit spirituality, finally says, “

We must look, therefore, for a teacher among those who have had long, intense, and profound experience of the Holy Spirit acting in them; who also as spiritual counselors have had the opportunity of knowing the inner experience of many others...and preferably, who have left a teaching which has proved fruitful for many in generation after generation of those dedicated to living Christian life in the Spirit.⁵⁸

Perhaps it is reasonable to say that Ignatius is the founding energy of the modern spiritual direction movement. More germane to this project is the analogy of *guide* that the Ignatian tradition presents for the judicatory model that I am proposing to construct for a framework on a spirituality of the pastoral call process. Local churches need a guide to help them rediscover and cultivate their own spiritual insights so they can be more attentiveness to the ways of the Spirit, its “signs, patterns and fruits.” Recognizing the amusing presumptuousness of any hint at a suggestion that judicatory staff of all stripes have the qualities of an Ignatius, I will instead use the analogy of *guide* as embodied not necessarily by the judicatory staff or the regional pastor, but by the “spiritual exercises” that constitutes the framework I will propose to construct. In this framework I see the regional pastor or the judicatory staff, instead, as the *facilitator* of the *guide*.

In the next chapter, I will outline the “architectural design” or the “drawing plans”, if I may, of this framework.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.6.

CHAPTER 5

TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF THE CONGREGATIONAL PASTORAL CALL PROCESS

Constructing an American Baptist Regional Judicatory Framework

I alluded earlier to the fact that I joined the regional pastoral staff of ABCNJ in the summer of 2004 from a previous staff role as the national director of missionary recruitment for International Ministries, the global ministry arm of ABCUSA. It was during the years in that role that my long-standing interest in the spirituality of vocational discernment was focused, and where my understanding of its vital role in appreciating the meaning and purpose of God's call in one's life was crystallized.

In the Fall of 2004, and before I even contemplated joining the Doctor of Ministry program at New York Theological Seminary (NYTS), I wrote a proposal for the senior regional pastor/executive minister of ABCNJ, and the rest of my senior regional pastoral colleagues, to outline a strategic approach in the region's pastoral call process. The proposal was aimed at strengthening the denominational pastoral call resource tool from the American Baptist Personnel Services (ABPS) utilized in the region. I enrolled at NYTS's Doctor of Ministry program in the Fall of 2006. Little did I know that the elements of the 2004 proposal that I wrote were to become the "architectural foundation" of my demonstration project!

While written in the Fall of 2004, and before conceiving that I was going to be part of a Doctor of Ministry program anywhere, the proposal already reflects what would become the context of the specific focus of this demonstration project, which in retrospect I mention at its infancy stage as the number one item under the *The Discernment Model - A Training Curriculum for Pastoral Search Committees* section of the proposal. This is a component that is missing in the ABPS material, and now is the focus of this demonstration project. The proposal also outlines many of the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that I expanded on in the previous chapters of this project. The full, unabridged, text of the proposal follows:

PROPOSED SCREENING & DISCERNMENT TRAINING PROGRAM
AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES OF NEW JERSEY

Rev. Elmo D. Familiaran

Fall 2004

Draft - For Internal Use Only. Not for Circulation Please.

Brief Overview

This program is designed for the training and preparation of search committees of congregations in the ABCNJ. The area pastoral team (senior regional pastor, associate regional pastors/area ministers) implements the program. The program assumes that there is a vital need for search committees of ABCNJ congregations to be prepared and equipped for the vital task of calling a pastor. It is the responsibility of the region area team to enable its search committees and congregations to be conversant and skilled in the use of the various resources of the region and the denomination, and the community of faith at large. The call of a pastor is a profound journey that a congregation undertakes.

There are measurable tools that are available to, and skills that can be acquired by, congregations that will enable them to make this journey a healthy and a faithful one. The region staff can do no less than make this available to the churches that they serve.

Major Assumptions in Discernment of Pastoral Leadership

1. The nature of the process of discerning God's call to church and pastor include both tangible and intangible dimensions.
2. The nature of this process embraces the inherent complexity of the context of ministry (the congregation), the human person (the candidate), and the oftentimes empirically elusive reality of the Spirit's activity. As such, the Personnel (Human Resources) and the Spiritual dimensions of the "search and call" process are held together in creative tension.
3. The nature of the "search and call" task, therefore, is centered in finding the points of convergence of several complex - but intertwining- factors that reside in the reality of both the minister/candidate and the congregation, respectively. Placing all these in the context of discerning the will of the Spirit underscores the peculiar and ephemeral nature of the discernment endeavor in the context of ministry. The discerning community, therefore, is essentially asked to oversee a process that, by the very nature of its subject, cannot be an end unto itself.
4. It is no longer adequate to find the answer to the "success" or "failure" of a pastoral placement only by looking for the *right* person who possesses all the qualifications and the qualities of a good pastor. This is essential but not solitary. There are other factors that intertwine which give rise to and are instrumental in a healthy pastor-congregation partnership.

5. The process of calling a pastor, therefore, recognizes the primary reality that several interrelated complex factors constitute the screening/discernment journey and not one factor overwhelms or trumps the others. A balanced approach brings us closer to and yields the best results.

The Discernment Model - A Training Curriculum for Pastoral Search Committees

Dynamism characterizes the life in the Spirit and the relationships that abide in human community. The “Search and Call” process must, therefore, be elastic and open to the instruction of experience, new insight and knowledge. Before the actual screening event gets underway, the search committee needs to undergo orientation and training for the entire search process experience and all of its components. The content of the training curriculum for search committees includes the following major elements:

1. Discerning God’s Call – a dialogue/training on spiritual disciplines involved in discernment, and the nature of Call.
2. Team Work and Team Ministry.
3. Components of the Screening Process, the Screening Protocol, Interpreting the ABPS Profile.
4. Decision-Making, Selecting and Calling the Pastor, Making Covenant.

The Screening Process

A reasonable screening matrix should include the following major components:

1. The Congregational Reflection and Self-Assessment.
2. Candidate Credentials and the ABPS Profile.

3. The Résumé/Curriculum Vitae.
4. Reference Reports.
5. Structured Interview Process.
6. Criminal/Misconduct Background Check.

The Screening Protocol

The primary goal of the screening event is to narrow down a pool of candidates into a contact list, a finalist list, and selection of the final candidate for pastoral call who not only demonstrates the best possible match and fit with the reality of the congregation, but who also – together with the search committee’s discernment – affirms the congregation’s sense of God’s call. The meetings are always premised on prayer and intentional awareness of the Spirit’s leading. A suggested sequence of this event proceeds as follows:

1. Initial review of ABPS profiles, identifying possible matches, review of background, credentials, experience, and qualifications.
2. From this initial first step emerges the first contact list. A general letter of inquiry is sent to this list.
3. The telephone screening. Respondents who indicated interest in joining the search are screened over the telephone, following a structured set of questions.
4. Another round of screening is conducted by the search committee. A secondary contact list is identified. A second round of letters is sent to those who made the cut, and those who did not.

5. Reference checks. Referees of those who made it to the secondary contact list are interviewed by members of the search committee over the telephone.
6. The secondary list is further narrowed down to a finalists list of 5-6 candidates who will have a face to face interview with the search committee.
7. The finalist list is ranked and the search committee chooses the top 3 candidates.
8. The search committee conducts a neutral pulpit screening.
9. The candidate selection. The final candidate is selected, offered the position, and if he/she accepts is then presented to the congregation for a vote after a candidating Sunday. If vote passes and the call is officially consummated, the two other candidates are informed.

The training is designed to utilize all of one day. Local churches centrally located to a given group of search committees are a desired venue. A pilot event will be conducted on January 8, 2005 for at least 6 search committees recently formed in the region (end of proposal text).

From this foundation emerged the plan of implementation which, all together, forms the entire scaffolding of this demonstration project. What follows are the goals and strategies that I have developed to implement that plan.

PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION

Goals and Strategies

GOAL I To create a climate of acceptance in the region for the new model of spirituality in the discernment process for calling pastors.

- Strategy 1 Beginning October 2008, I and the support staff of the region office will make one monthly newsletter announcement, at least five Constant Contact email campaigns to regional constituency, and post a front page article on the region's website.
- Evaluation:* After one month, the site team and I will be able to document at least 15 requests for additional information regarding the new model of spirituality in the discernment process
- Strategy 2 During month of October 2008, I will conduct a survey of current pastors from at least two clergy groups in the region regarding their experience with pastoral search committees that facilitated their current placement.
- Evaluation:* Through the survey questionnaires handed back by pastors, the site team will be able to document 1) 15% have responded, and 2) 2/3 of those respondents will indicate interest in seeing new ways of improving the way pastoral search committees function.
- Strategy 3 Through the help of my regional pastor colleagues, announcements/presentations will be conducted beginning November of 2008 at regularly scheduled monthly meetings of clergy groups of the eight associations in the region.
- Evaluation:* Through observation, each regional pastor will be able to attest that at least 75% of clergy present in each gathering will have a positive and affirming response to the new instrument.

- GOAL II Orient and enlist members on my site team and selected part-time ABCNJ staff that will assist in the region-wide roll out of the new discernment model.
- Strategy 1 Identify and enlist key participants for this “deployment team”, focusing on skill sets particularly around pastoral experience, spiritual sensitivity, theological insight.
- Evaluation:* By using a targeted (as opposed to open) recruitment effort, the site team would be able to document that I will have recruited at least 4 members of this “deployment team” no later than the end of October 2008.
- Strategy 2 Conduct a training and orientation retreat by the middle of *December* 2008 for the site team and the deployment team to introduce the concept and essential elements of the new discernment model, and craft a strategy that will guide the implementation of the new model. Begin this training by bringing at least two members of the team to a congregational discernment retreat with, if possible, a follow-up meeting with team members by early January of 2009.
- Evaluation:* Through group analysis and discussion, the follow-up meeting will show that the deployment team will have gained a basic understanding of the fundamental elements of the new discernment model, and created a regionally contextualized “roll-out” strategy and timeline.

Strategy 3 Enlist the participation of the deployment and the site teams in testing the new discernment model with at least two pilot discernment committees that may emerge between July-December 2008.

Evaluation: The site team will be able to document that at least two congregations and their pastoral discernment committees will have applied and experienced a transformed pastoral call process in their own contexts.

GOAL III To teach congregational leadership and the pastoral discernment committees how to utilize a biblically and spiritually grounded, and yet organizationally balanced, discernment process.

Strategy 1 In collaboration with the site team, the use of research materials, surveys and focus groups, I will draft by January 2009 an action-reflection manual that will serve as the guide for pastoral discernment committees. A congregational leadership gifts survey will be part of this action-reflection manual. This manual will be an addendum to the pastoral search process now in use in the ABCNJ region.

Evaluation: By the end of January 2009, I will be able to submit to the site team the preliminary draft of the action-reflection manual for their review.

Strategy 2 I and/or members of the site team will schedule training events and implement the new discernment model for pastoral discernment committees that will emerge between January 2009, and moving forward.

Evaluation: Every pastoral discernment committee that is formed by January 2009 will have begun the discernment process in appropriate fashion.

Evaluation Process

A Methodological Overview

The Site Team was the main working group that helped me develop the evaluation tools, survey instrumentation, and identify the criteria for evaluation of each goal. The Site Team, together with my demonstration project advisor, became the primary group that provided ongoing assessment and evaluation not only of my progress, but of the essential components of my demonstration project. At the outset I articulated that this demonstration project faced a unique evaluative challenge because its primary target is not static and preexisting in my particular ministry context, i.e., the occurrence in time of pastoral transitions that eventuate in a search and call process, by its very nature, is fluid and unpredictable.

It is, therefore, difficult to anticipate with certainty how many pastoral transitions were going to occur during the period of implementation. In this case, one of the possible things I proposed to do in consultation with my Site Team was to start deploying, ahead of the scheduled implementation period, prototypes of the training and reflection instruments to whatever pastoral transitions and/or pastoral call committees that already present themselves. The site team also worked closely with me in identifying benchmarks for progress in the attainment of each goal and its subsidiary strategies, and helped me

create a reasonable and realistic strategic timeline in the carrying out of the various action steps of each strategy.

In July of 2008 my mother, a New Jersey resident and who had been fighting cancer for two years, became critically ill while travelling with friends in Los Angeles. She underwent emergency surgery there, and was hospitalized for over two weeks. I and my siblings who are all residents of the east coast as I am, commuted in teams to care for her throughout her hospitalization. But she never regained enough strength to leave the hospital, never mind flying back home. On July 27, 2008 she passed away in Los Angeles. We flew her cremated remains back east, and held a beautiful memorial service on August 9, 2008. I was my mother's health proxy, and the co-executor of her will. I am saying all this because that entire experience, and its aftermath, stopped my doctoral work dead on its tracks. Mentally and emotionally it took me some time to regain my focus on the project. So it was very therapeutic that my siblings and I went ahead with our planned family reunion on August 15, 2008. My mother was supposed to headline this event. It was a time of healing for all of us and a time of celebrating her memory. We all returned to our normal lives on September 2, 2008.

In early October of 2008, I asked to meet with my advisor, Dr. George McClain. I asked him to review my project's goals and strategies with me, with an eye towards looking at what I have done so far, what remained to be done, and what was realistic and absolutely essential for the my project to have integrity. I had enough information and experience to bring to the table as to what has emerged to be realistic in the implementation that I have done up to that point. With the help of my advisor I was able to use this to forecast what would be attainable moving forward. We were then able to

consolidate some goals and strategies, and eliminated some that were not going to have any impact whatsoever on the project's ultimate result. Yet even after that, some goals and strategies had to be honed by reality. What follows is a goal by goal evaluation of the strategies that were outlined above.

Goal One

Strategy one of this goal called for one monthly newsletter announcement and five email campaigns announcing the new model. What actually took place was that the site team was hesitant to make that announcement before they actually saw the finished demonstration project. Since three of members of my site team are senior staff in the region with me – one of whom, Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, as executive minister and senior regional pastor is the head of the entire regional ministry team – the site team had a lot at stake in seeing the majority of the project written out first. Instead, I was authorized to make the announcements at our monthly all-staff meetings. This is the regularly scheduled meeting where the entire regional ministry team staff, including the part-timers, met for worship, planning, programming and coordinating. Including the part-time folks, the region is composed of 22 people altogether. The announcement was to indicate that if each staff member, in the course of tier interaction with our constituency, would receive a request for assistance in a pastoral search, the response was to first indicate that a discernment retreat/workshop is the first step of the regional search and call process.

Strategy two was exceeded. Originally, this strategy called for a survey of at least two clergy groups regarding their experience with the pastoral call committee that

facilitated their current placement. What I eventually ended up doing was to conduct the survey region-wide, to over 275 pastors on the regional registry. There were 89 responses received back, reflecting a 32% response rate. The original evaluation threshold only anticipated a 15% response.

With the help of my regional pastor/area minister colleagues, strategy three of this goal was to announce the new discernment model to clergy groups during their regularly scheduled monthly meetings. The level of information shared was uneven among the eight groups, but there was an overwhelming affirmation of this resource from the pastors groups, far more than the 75% threshold mentioned in the evaluative criteria for this strategy. They invariably felt that we can never do too much in the area of strengthening pastoral call committees.

Goal Two

Strategy one of this goal called for creating a “deployment team” that will assist in rolling out the new discernment model to the entire region. It turned out that this strategy was not necessary. First, the introduction of this new addition to the pastoral call process utilized by the region turned out to be not so drastic - or needed to be - to necessitate forming such a team. What has happened instead is that churches that contacted the region during the implementation period who wanted to initiate a pastoral call process were informed that the first step in the process was to require a discernment retreat/workshop for all their church leadership. The “roll out” took place in this individualized way. In conjunction with this, the pastoral call process description on the region’s website was updated to include the discernment retreat/workshop.

Strategy two and three almost proceeded on parallel tracks. A variation of the original intent was made. Instead of a training session for the site team and the erstwhile “deployment team” to introduce the elements of the new discernment model as spelled out in strategy one, I met instead with the site team in December 2, 2008 and introduced the model (Appendix C) as it has already been implemented in two pilot discernment committees. Also, by the time this meeting with the site team took place, one of the members of the site team, Vernl E. Mattson, had also attended one of those pilot training events that I conducted in November 15, 2008 for Bergen Point Community Church in Bayonne, NJ. The one other pilot group for which I conducted the discernment retreat/workshop on November 8, 2008, was First Baptist Church of Morristown. And so during my presentation, there was also some reporting from Vernl E. Mattson that was included in the group analysis and discussion.

Goal Three

Strategy one of this goal was fully met. In fact, the timeline was moved forward. Instead of the projected end of January 2009 deadline, I met with the site team in December 2, 2008. In that meeting I presented the training manual that constitutes the new model. The congregational gifts survey that was mentioned in the strategy as another item in the manual was not realized during the implementation period primarily due to lack of time. I intend to incorporate this survey in the manual as soon as possible.

Strategy two of this goal calls for implementing the new discernment model for congregations that seek to initiate a pastoral call process between January 2009, and moving forward. One congregation, in fact, did emerge during this time and already

utilized the region protocol with the new model spearheading the process. In February 14, 2009, Hamburg Baptist Church in Hamburg, NJ became the first congregation in 2009 to utilize the new method.

In this chapter I have laid out the “drawing plans” or the “architectural design” that, altogether, constitutes the framework or structural scaffolding of the new model for a spirituality of discernment in the congregational pastoral call process in the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey. This model will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6
THE DIVINE SUMMONS
The Movements of God's Call

The discernment training module/manual that is set forth in this chapter is the primary implemented by-product of this demonstration project. The target audience of this training module is the governing body of the congregation. In the American Baptist tradition, this body could be the church leadership and officers constituted by members of all the Boards (Deacons, Trustees, Elders) or Church Council, to use another common terminology heard in American Baptist local church polity vernacular. If the church membership is very small, the retreat can be opened to the entire congregation. While the main transformational intent of this demonstration project is to cultivate and grow a spirituality of discernment in the process of selecting members of the pastoral call committee itself, that transformation will take time to become a new “culture” in the regional life of the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey.

It is still a common occurrence that by the time the ABCNJ region office staff is contacted by a church announcing their desire to begin the pastoral call process, their pastoral call committee has already been formed. In this case, the pastoral call committee or “search” committee should also be included in this discernment training module. But moving forward, the first response of the region, when contacted by an ABCNJ congregation requesting assistance to begin a pastoral call process, is to announce that the

first step of the regional process is a discernment retreat for all church leadership. If the church representative who calls indicates that a “search” committee has not yet been formed, then the regional pastor must affirm that, and reiterate that the discernment retreat is in fact designed to assist them in that selection. A date needs to be set that is mutually feasible for all. The regional pastor will then urge the leadership group to read two books before the retreat. First is, *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* by Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. Second, *Discerning God’s Will Together* by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen.

Another good recent resource is *Calling Clergy: A Spiritual and Practical Guide Through the Search Process* by Elizabeth Rankin Geitz.⁵⁹ Her work essentially creates the entire guide for the Episcopal Church, USA, whereas ABCUSA already has an existing guide. Her work is designed for discernment groups that have already been formed within a congregation. My project, on the other hand, has a different starting point. It creates a new component, an addendum if you will, for the *existing* ABCUSA guide, designed specifically for assisting congregations how to select members of a pastoral call committee. But Geitz’s work has some very important contributions to make in the entire endeavor.

The discernment training module is designed to be led by ABCNJ regional pastors. It is conceivable that a trained retreat leader may lead the retreat in the future. But for this moment, I am specifically designing the retreat to be led by the senior

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Rankin Geitz, *Calling Clergy: A Spiritual and Practical Guide Through the Search Process* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2007).

regional pastoral team of ABCNJ (either the executive minister/senior regional pastor, or any of the associate regional pastors/area ministers).

The discernment training is designed to be conducted in a retreat setting. It will require at least 5-6 hours, with a fellowship meal at midday included. The host church is expected to provide this meal.

The Divine Summons

The Movements of God's Call and Our Response: a Story of Four Encounters

Basic materials needed:

- 1. PowerPoint files for projection*
- 2. Projection screen or a blank wall*
- 3. Newsprint and markers*
- 4. Appropriate handouts*

Session One – A Gallery of Neighbors and Friends

Goal: Through the practice of listening and storytelling and retelling, to cultivate “story awareness” of the inherent complexity of the human person. Each person is expected to expand their perceptual acuity, and appreciate the power of perspectives in shaping the way we make our decisions.

Note for the retreat leader: this lesson lifts up the limits of our perceptions, and introduces in an experiential way a fundamentally important premise of the reality of spirituality – the dialectic between knowing and trusting.

1. After some introduction and prayer, the retreat leader addresses briefly the specific context of the congregation by reviewing the events leading up to this new journey.
2. The leader then introduces the first session, announcing to the group that for the first activity each one will be required to build their “life museum.” A museum has several “galleries” or exhibit areas. But in the case of the life museum, those exhibit areas will be a specific period on *your* life. How well do we really know each other?
3. Ask the group to divide into dyads or pairs. If the group is odd numbered, a triad is allowable but no larger than that. The groupings must not include spouses or relatives. They need to find a spot in the room where they can have a conversation without talking over another group.
4. The groupings are then given these instructions: You have just been given the honor to build your own life museum. The primary audience will be your partner(s). There are several exhibit areas in this museum:
 - a. Childhood, teen years, college years.
 - b. Spiritual heritage.
 - c. Favorite job.
 - d. Major accomplishments.
 - e. Skills you bring to (name of church/team).
 - f. Defining event or person in your Christian journey.
 - g. What is your fondest memory of (church/team)?
 - h. Your greatest fear, apprehension or anxiety about (church/team).

- i. The future (Imagine that this area is roped off for now and is under construction. What do you hope to show here someday?).
5. To further clarify the exercise, offer the following guide questions as to how they can fill their exhibit areas:
 - a. What do you want your colleagues to see and understand about you in each exhibit area of your life museum?
 - b. What experiences, events and persons best illustrate each of these exhibit areas? Choose one or two displays for each exhibit area.
 - c. As one builds her/his museum, the partner takes down notes. The roles are then reversed.
 - d. Be ready to talk about your partner's museum with the rest of the group in plenary, and describe what you saw in each of her/his exhibit areas. As stories are shared, listen for common themes, points and junctures where the journeys of others intersect with that of your own.
 - e. As one partner narrates, the other listens and takes down notes. The role is then reversed.
6. The leader here needs to keep close time. The actual number of people in the retreat group will determine how much time is allocated in the dyads. The time of sharing in the plenary also needs to be factored into the overall time that is set aside for this session. So it is also important that the number of "exhibit areas" be adjusted according to the size of the group. If the group is small, then more "exhibit areas" can be covered. If the group is larger, then less "exhibit areas" may be used for the exercise.

7. After all the sharing in the dyads is ended, call the group into plenary and ask each person to report on the life museum of their partner. Ask, “What did the exercise of listening teach you?” “What did you learn about being aware of someone’s story?”

Session Two – Exploring Discernment

Goal: To create a spiritually grounded rational framework for understanding the nature of discernment.

Note to the leader: This session essentially is a time of open dialogue. The role of the leader is to facilitate rational exploration of the nature of discernment, and to cultivate the realization that our intellect and our spirituality are not diametrically opposed spheres of life. They are unified spheres of reality that inform each other and come as gifts from God.

1. Begin with a discussion on the following quote from C.S. Lewis: “To follow the vocation does not mean happiness but once it has been heard, there is no happiness for those who do not follow.”⁶⁰ What does this say to you about discerning God’s call?
2. Say something like this: Discerning God’s call engages us with life’s questions of meaning and purpose. But trying to discover God’s call in our lives presents a great difficulty for most of us. It is not easy to describe God’s will for our lives, and how we experience God’s presence intersecting with our journeys. Rational thought alone is inadequate because the questions, “What is God calling me to do?” and “What is God calling me to be?” are spiritual questions. Understanding

⁶⁰ Cited in Gilbert Meilaender, “Divine Summons”, *The Christian Century*, (November, 2000) p. 1111.

life's meaning and purpose is a deeply existential endeavor that engages both intellect and spirit. Discerning God's call to both church and pastor include both tangible and intangible dimensions. The context of ministry (the congregation) and the human person (the candidate) are inherently complex. And so discernment involves finding points of convergence of several complex but intertwining factors. Several interrelated factors constitute the discernment journey. Not one factor trumps all others.

3. What spiritual disciplines can we practice that are grounded on these themes?
 - a. *Prayer* – We need to be “asking” someone, staying connected with God.
 - b. *Listening* – We need to learn how to listen to the perspective of others, understanding that behind that perspective is a story. We need to practice listening so that we can hear a call, the invitation to meaning and purpose.
 - c. *Connecting with God* – Solitude, meditation and communing with nature connect us with a reality much large than ourselves. Practice “empathy” with the pain and woundedness of others and of creation itself. These practices make us sensitive to the work of the Spirit who is universally present in the world.
 - d. *Studying the Bible* – reading the stories of the pilgrims who have walked before us teaches us how they acted when they came to the end of their own answers.
 - e. *Find mentors or journey companions* – This is a discipline championed by the classical thinkers in spirituality and discernment. We will look at one model in the next section. Seeking a journey companion creates a state of

“needing” someone other than ourselves – an attitude that opens up our soul to God.

- f. *Cultivate the mind and the spirit, not only the senses* – We need to give time to read and feed, if not develop, an intellectual curiosity. We also need to explore life’s deepest questions and to connect with the triumphs of others and the world’s need for repair and healing.

Session Three – The Movements of God’s Call

Goal: To appreciate signs, patterns and fruits of the ways of the Holy Spirit through the inductive study of four biblical narratives of God’s call, and how they help identify important qualities for a spirituality of discernment.

Note to the Leader: This session invariably is commenced after a midday meal. By this time you would have used up the entire morning portion of the retreat time. Just as well, because this activity is interactive and will mitigate tiredness and the usual wooziness that comes right after a meal!

The Four Stories

1. Moses – Exodus 3: 1-12
2. Gideon – Judges 6: 11-24
3. Jeremiah – 1: 4-10
4. Esther – Chapter 4

The Discernment Exercise

1. Divide the group into 4 smaller cells. A recorder for each cell needs to be appointed.

2. Assign each cell a scripture passage.
3. Have every member of each cell read their assigned scripture (aloud by one person and the others follow in their own Bibles, or individually in silence).
4. After reading the scripture, the cells spend time in solitude.
 - a. Each member goes away to a quiet corner in the room to reflect on the scripture passage and spend time in prayer. What is the scripture text saying to me?
5. The members assemble back to their respective cells and discuss the following (leader notes down feedback):
 - a. What is the immediate situation or setting of the story?
 - b. Describe the task that is being given to the one being summoned.
 - c. How is the divine presence described in the text?
 - d. What is the reaction of the one being summoned?
 - e. How does God/the divine presence respond to the reaction of the one being summoned?
6. After responding to the above questions, reflect on how the story connects with your own congregation's story right now.
 - a. How would you describe the present situation of your congregation?
 - b. What are some of the reactions/responses that you or other members of your congregation have to your experience of transition?
 - c. What does our biblical tradition speak to your experience of transition?
 - d. How should you respond?
7. What discernment qualities or gifts are described in your Bible story?

- a. What qualities and gifts should a member of the Pastoral Call Committee have?
 - b. List on the newsprint the qualities/gifts that are named by the group.
 - c. Encourage the leadership group to consider the qualities/gifts they have discerned as guides for selecting members of the pastoral call committee. If the pastoral committee has already been formed, charge the committee to enter into the discipline of cultivating the qualities named in the retreat, and charge the leadership to hold each other accountable in that effort.
8. You may elect at this point to utilize a very helpful section that Elizabeth Rankin Geitz used in her model,⁶¹ with a little variation that I added like so:
- a. Ask the participants to tape a piece of paper on the back of another person until everyone has one on their backs. Have each one take a marker and ask them to go around and write on every participant's paper the gifts they have seen in that person. Make sure that each person must make the rounds to write something on every person's paper. When everyone is finished, have each person remove the paper on their back and read the gifts that other persons have seen in them.
 - b. Instruct the participants to hold on to their list of gifts as perceived by the community. What *signs, patterns and fruits* did others see in you? If you have been perceived as possessing a gift or gifts of spiritual discernment, would you consider offering yourself for consideration as a possible member of the pastoral call committee?

⁶¹ Geitz, pp. 18-19.

9. To conclude, gather everyone around in a circle, holding hands, and ask for a few to pray spontaneously as they are led, but to include a specific prayer for deepened discernment in how to, as Molly Marshall said, “join the dance” with the Holy Spirit.

After the retreat, the regional pastor talks with the church Moderator to discuss some immediate goals and their timeline. It is important to identify what the next steps are going to be. If the pastoral call committee has already been formed, the next step is to schedule a training session for the pastoral call committee in the actual call process that now commences. I have written an annotated outline of the chronology of steps in the ABCUSA process (Appendix D).

In place of the entire published guide/manual of ABCUSA, I hand this out at the training session to each member of the committee so that they will have a simpler, more portable and less expensive “map” of how the entire discernment journey looks like from beginning to end. On the other hand, if the pastoral call committee has not yet been formed (which is the intended practice and manner of acting in the pastoral call process that this project will cultivate in regional life), then the regional pastor will need to ask the church Moderator for an anticipated date when the church will formally elect their pastoral call committee, using of course the insights gained from the discernment retreat/workshop.

CHAPTER 7

GROWING IN MINISTRY

Ministry Competencies and Epilogue

Ministerial Competencies

The members of my site team are Lee B. Spitzer, senior regional pastor and executive minister of ABCNJ; Glenn Porter, associate regional pastor/area minister for the North Associations of ABCNJ; Mary Mild, recently retired manager of the American Baptist Personnel Services and developer of the current ABCUSA pastoral search manual; and Jose Norat Rodriguez, area director for Iberoamerica, with International Ministries, ABCUSA. All of them are not only valued colleagues, but also friends. I am truly blessed to have such outstanding professionals on my site team.

It was not until February 27, 2007 that the core site team had its first plenary meeting with me. Due to severe travel schedules of three of the site team members between the site team dinner in December and through the first two and a half weeks in February, the initial meeting was not possible up until then. However, in anticipation of this eventuality in the schedules of my site team, I wrote an omnibus letter to all of them outlining the dates when each component of the demonstration project was to be discussed, relative to where we were in the timeline continuum. I mailed competency assessment, challenge statement draft, and goal and strategy development materials to

each member ahead of time so they each could work on the stages even, in the case of two of them, while in the west coast and overseas respectively.

In planning to integrate these tasks in this one meeting with the site team, my hope was to get myself back on track in relation to the proper tempo of class requirements for the demonstration project. I was in email contact with all of my site team. And so by the time we met on February 27, we hit the floor running, so to speak, and tackled the assignments. I was very impressed with my site team (well, this is the reason why I chose them in the first place!). My first session with the Site Team began with prayer. After that, we all agreed to go through each competency *ad seriatim*, and to have each site team member report to the whole group his/her evaluation of me in that particular competency area. After all the site team members completed their evaluations of me in each area, I was given the chance to respond.

The session far exceeded my expectations. I was moved and humbled by the depth of the appreciation of the reports of each of my site team members on my ministry competencies, and was reminded again that I am never completely aware of how I have affected and touched people through the years of my ministry – even by those I consider my very close friends! I am truly grateful to God for their feedback. It was a gift.

In summary, the following are the combined conclusions of the site team members on my ministry competencies.

Competency Areas

1. Theologian – Continue
2. Preacher/Interpreter of Sacred Text - Continue

3. Worship Leader - Continue
4. Prophetic Agent - Continue
5. Leader – Continue
6. Religious Educator – Continue
7. Counselor – Continue
8. Pastor – Continue (for two members). Develop (within regional context, from one).
9. Spiritual Leader – Continue
10. Ecumenist – Continue
11. Evangelist – Continue
12. Administrator – Continue (for two members). Develop (from one) in light of the reality of our regional work where we are constantly multi-tasking. The tension of focusing on one church in relation to being present for many others.
13. Professional – Continue

My Site Team worked collaboratively with me to identify key competency areas that are directly related to my challenge statement. I intentionally did not come with a preconceived notion of my own key competency areas relative to the challenge statement, and intentionally wanted to leave this matter to the give and take in the group. I was not disappointed. There was a very good discussion which ensued around interfacing areas and in the end the Site team and I reached a combined consensus, based on the stated criteria of the assessment process, on the key competency areas essential for my challenge statement and demonstration project. These are as follows:

1. Spiritual leader

2. Pastor
3. Religious Educator

The one competency that my site team identified as needing to be strengthened is that of *Pastor*. The one other competency area that is necessary for this demonstration project is that of *Spiritual Leader*. For these two competency areas where I need growth during the completion of the demonstration project, I propose the following program of development:

Spiritual Leader

- Goal:* To grow deeper in understanding and skill in the area of personal and group discernment.
- Strategy 1* Read at least one book on spiritual discernment.
- Strategy 2* During the period between March-December 2008, I will meet for sharing and conversation at least once every two months with a pastoral colleague and friend with a special background on spirituality and discernment.
- Evaluation:* By the end of December 2008, my colleague and friend through personal conversation with me will be able to attest that I have gained a deeper appreciation of the nature of spiritual discernment.

Lee B. Spitzer, who not only is a colleague and friend apart from being my boss, is a spiritual director by academic preparation and training. We talk a lot about our ministry in the region in the context of his spiritual journey paradigm. I have learned a lot from his companionship in this journey. By the default focus of this project, I had to read

several books on spirituality and spiritual discernment. In terms of the new resources I read in this area, I found most fulfilling the work of Molly T. Marshall on *Joining the Dance: a Theology of the Spirit*, who I cited several times in this project. The feedback of my site team on the completed chapters that I passed on to them for review also attested to this growth in understanding on my part.

Pastor

Goal: To carefully manage time especially while working on the demonstration project.

Strategy 1 Monitor my monthly ministry contacts chart to identify areas where I might be getting off balance.

Evaluation: Through regularly scheduled meetings with me, the site team will be able to document and track my progress in maintaining balance between my demonstration project work, and my ministry responsibilities.

Time management, it seems to me, is never “reached” as a final destination as one would say “I have arrived, I have finished the journey.” I have grown instead to realize that in the heavy demand of pastoral work and judicatory responsibilities, I find myself oftentimes faced with only the choice of doing my very best in a given situation. Time and space, physics, still filter all our good intentions. Even Jesus recommended that we need to simply “come away” somewhere and just let things be until we get reinvigorated by solitude and the ministrations of family, companions and friends. Much of ministry refuses to be calendared. Yet much of ministry is accomplished in the context of loving and mutually respecting relationships – even if it is “ministry delayed.”

Each of the regional ministry team members' ministry contacts are monitored each month using a spreadsheet that is overseen by the senior regional pastor and executive minister. In the months that my ministry contacts were lagging in certain areas, the executive minister, who also happens to be on my site team, calls my attention to the charts and we assess relevant factors that are causing the lag.

As I mentioned earlier, my mother's illness and death last summer severely delayed my work on the demonstration project. I also had to take a significant amount of time away from work. Our monthly ministry contacts monitoring chart in the region office constitutes goals set by the ministry team. This disruption in my life caused by my mother's illness and death revealed a fissure in the trajectory of meeting my ministry goals, at least for a good period of two months. But later in the year, I was able to catch up both in my work on the demonstration project and in my ministry contact goals.

In the Fall of 2008, Glenn Porter resigned from ABCNJ to accept a call to be pastor of an ABC congregation in Norfolk, Virginia. He was very involved in the site team and his leaving was a loss for me. However, he pledged to do his best to stay in contact with me for the remainder of my work. But his new responsibilities immediately took up all his time. While I still included him in all the correspondences that I sent to the entire site team, his input has understandably become absent since he left for Norfolk. Since then, I asked my other area minister colleague, Vernl E. Mattson, who was serving already as a "consultant" to the project, to actively join the core site team.

The Divine Summons to the Pastor, the Judicatory and the Church – An Epilogue

The necessary focus on the pastoral call committee has understandably placed the pastor on the periphery of this project. But I trust that the very focus of the project in its

entirety has, in fact, cast a brighter light on the pastor, the “other” interlocutor in the discernment journey addressed in this project. And from my vantage point as a regional/judicatory pastor, and author of this project, it is likewise my hope that this work has also fulfilled my intention at emphasizing the pastoral and spiritual “guide” role of the judicatory body in the larger faith community – far from its traditional and more common bureaucratic persona. God’s summons is a cosmic summons; it is a summons to pastor, people and what I would call the “ecclesial shepherd”, commonly called the “judicatory.” It is a cosmic summons because it calls all in the community of faith to the work of love that remains unfinished in the world. It is a summons for all to join the Spirit in its continuing ministry in the world.

We live in a society – and perhaps a world – that, in my opinion, is dominated by the secular vision of success. Success from this perspective sees *growth* primarily from the point of view of “big-ness” and “expansiveness.” Conversely, what remains “small” numerically is tacitly labeled as not successful or not *growing*. Materialistic secularism, and its insidious expressions in society, is perhaps the strongest challenge that the community of Jesus will face in a post-Christian American future. One only needs to pay even short attention to the more recent studies on contemporary Christian realities, such as Philip Jenkins’, “*The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*”, and we are starkly reminded that the growth of vibrant Christian communities and churches is happening in the poorer half of the globe, while churches in affluent countries like the United States continue to struggle against obsolescence.

The biblical model of the community of Jesus is counter-cultural to the materialistic vision of growth. In Matthew 6: 25 and ff., Jesus understands the human

preoccupation to the primacy of material wealth and comfort. But there Jesus announces the priority behavior in the new community that he is calling: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Growth understood in the secular, materialistic vision of success presupposes the elimination of obstacles to such growth. Translated in the community of human relationships this means, among other things, creating and maintaining homogenous environments where everybody think alike, look the same, eat the same food, live around the same neighborhood, etc. But in the community of Jesus we are required and called to practice loving the one with whom we do not have much in common, or even the unlovable. Institutional objectives, like numerical growth, are important but in my mind should not be the starting point of ministry. Spiritual growth is the foundation of the community of Jesus.

Spirit must be, therefore, the primary driving force of its formation, not structure. If market culture and its accompanying pedigree of “success as bigness” becomes the driving force behind any impetus for growth in the church, then the church unwittingly becomes captive to the assumptions that anchor materialism. But the growth that emerges out of the natural overflow of spiritual ferment, or growth that is organized by the centrifuge of call, becomes the growth that truly is sustained by the Spirit. Like a mustard seed, it starts small but becomes a mighty tree not rooted in sand, but in good soil. It weathers storms better than the tree that is propagated only to look good on the outside because in its heart is Spirit.

And so churches, through the Spirit, call pastors to lead them, and organize themselves into an ecclesial community of churches and pastors embodied in the pastoral

reality of the judicatory. They bring together their resources so that they can accomplish more in ministry which they cannot do on their own. Jesus' reminder to his disciples that the kingdom of God is like a "mustard seed" remains a critical reminder to the contemporary church. Its growth is not grounded *a priori* on numerical growth. It is first and foremost grounded in Jesus' social vision in Luke 4, and directly linked to the work of building just relationships, working together against oppressive forces in the community, healing the breach, calling our denomination to the essential task of community, together equipping church members with practical resources that will enable them to apply their faith to their daily lives, developing strategies that encourage and promote healthy pastoral leadership and healthy congregations, telling and retelling the story of how the love of Christ transforms lives and society, and in so doing being vitally engaged in Jesus' mission.

Jesus is the head of the church and is the future of the church. It is the Spirit that ultimately makes the church grow and its growth is, first and foremost, spiritual. It is directly linked to the degree that the ethic of Jesus is practiced in its midst. The call to "strive first for the kingdom of God", is an abiding reminder for me that the primary task of the church is mission. In fact the church *is* mission. Herein lies the mystery: that it is in the giving of ourselves that we find our life!

I have shared with countless people in my journey in ministry that it took a powerful and clear experience of God's call in 1978 that gave me the strength to leave the loves of my life – a childhood dream to be a surgeon, my country and home culture, my family, and the woman who was to be my soul mate, and in one fell swoop embark on a journey into a foreign land and into a future completely unknown to me. It is this same

experience of call that has sustained me in the journey since, and remains the life-source and guide in the journeys yet to come. In my walk with many American Baptists wrestling with ministry as a chosen vocation, I have heard myself say repeatedly, “if you are not called, don’t come!” This is to say, that skills and talents are great in ministry but if you have not encountered God calling you in your soul, and if this call is not a fire that is burning unquenchably in your spirit, then ministry is not for you.

Yes, the joys of ministry are great but so are its special burdens; and when the burdens come they are heavy. The same is true for the discerning community, especially the pastoral call committee. It needs to hear the divine summons, and in order for it to hear the call it needs to ground itself in the Spirit. The disciplines that lead to a growing spirituality is the same for the church and the pastor; and, yes, just the same for the judicatory body! As I have traveled around the country in our churches and regions meeting pastors and people alike, the more that I am convinced that disciplined spiritual growth and formation are vital for the spiritual health for all.

There is a price to pay for the one who answers Christ’s call to follow him in church vocation. One must bear the cross and the mystery of vulnerability and servanthood that reside in that cross. The fire of call dims sometimes and at times down to a flickering amber and it is here, in these dark nights of the soul, that both pastor and people may find themselves alone. The ministry of St. Paul illuminates a model for all in the ecclesial community. St. Paul had deep and loving relationships with, for example, Barnabas, Lydia, Philemon, and Timothy. He was a shepherd among shepherds.

Paul was mentor/teacher and confidant to gifted Timothy and at the same time colleague and companion to Barnabas. He saw God already at work in Lydia’s life, and

inspired her spiritual gifts to take the form of call. In Philemon he found an intimate friend. They all encouraged each other's faith, rekindled each other's call during the difficult times. Paul provided assistance and support for the ministry of each church leader, resources for their work in their churches, equipped them for "the work of ministry."

Paul prayed with them, studied scriptures with them, counseled them, and trained them. On many occasions, when the challenges they faced seemed daunting and inspiration ebbed on the horizon, Paul recounted to them the story of God's mighty work of salvation in history, reminding them that they were heirs to this story in Christ. And then at certain times he admonished them. Yet Paul never was himself self-contained and aloof. Paul's ministry shines with the drama of a pastor and church builder who found strength and insight from his own colleagues and larger community of fellow followers of Christ, and who demonstrably longed for their companionship and who needed their wisdom and love for his own spiritual growth.

I say this because the call of the pastor is also the call to the church, and the judicatory. The Spirit calls pastors *for* the church. The same appreciation of call that roots pastors in the journey of their vocation is the same summons that roots congregations to their mission. As a congregation discerns the Spirit's leading when they search for a pastor, they are at the same time also re-membering their call. As pastors have to be grounded in "call" in their journey of discerning where it is that God calls them to serve, so must the church's pastoral call process be grounded in spirituality.

As I mentioned earlier, we live in a society dominated by the principality of materialistic secularism. A pastor not grounded in her/his experience of call can easily

undertake the journey of discernment just to find a “job.” In the same token, a congregation not grounded in a spirituality of the pastoral call process can undertake the journey just to find a “hero”, if not an employee. The spiritual starting point of this discernment process is crucial to both pastor and people, if God’s will for each one is to be discerned faithfully.

Finally, I would like to take us back to that night, and listen in again to the conversation between Rabbi Jesus and Rabbi Nicodemus in John chapter 3:6-8, 12:

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born anew.” The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit... If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

APPENDIX A

American Baptist Churches of New Jersey Pastors' Survey

APPENDIX B

Outline for Discernment Training for Pastoral Call Committees (PowerPoint)

APPENDIX C

Demonstration Project Outline (PowerPoint)

APPENDIX D

Annotated Chronology of Steps for American Baptist Churches of New Jersey Pastoral Call Process

APPENDIX E

Calling American Baptist Clergy Manual (CD)

*No reuse of this CD is allowed unless explicitly granted by the American Baptist
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